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# NOT IN OUR STARS

*Josiah E. Greene*

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
But in ourselves, that we are underlings."

—*Julius Caesar*

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY—NEW YORK  
1945

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JOSIAH E. GREENE

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To

PHIL *and* VIRGINIA

*for their advice, criticism, and assistance;  
above all, for their encouragement*

■

## NOTE

Weyland Meadows does not exist, but a community I once knew has served as model for many of its physical features and practical details. Human nature being what it is, the few who recognize this original from the book may also try to recognize people and events, and, finding that certain of both seem familiar, may conclude the whole is a distorted picture of them and their community. I should be sorry for this. The place had a hand in shaping my opinions, to be sure, and probably it suggested to me certain incidents and characters; but opinions, incidents and people have, I hope, more than local existence, and more than local application. Thus, if parts of the book happened, the circumstances have been consciously altered till they are no representation of actual events; and if some characters have facets that are traceable to living models, they still are not, and are not intended to be, portraits of any persons I have known.

J. E. G.

## PART I

### I

"It's the lousiest damn truck," Jake Larsen said. "Like a ten-ton trailer, the way it handles. And no guts, no brakes. I says to Red: 'Where's its pick-up? Why don't it climb hills? What do you do, put saltpeter in the engine?' He just shrugs. 'It won't ever be right,' he says; 'you need a new one!' Holy God, ain't I begged for a new one!"

Carly Groce, bent over the icebox report, grunted. "For Pete's sake, finish your sheet! It's late. If you wouldn't drive like a wild man, maybe they'd give you one."

"How many accidents I had?" Larsen was a little man, almost lost in a voluminous white coverall. His face was thin and pointed, his lips barely closing over prominent teeth, and he spoke with the superficial impatience of a man who has complained before and futilely.

Marty Myhychyk said, "Hey, chief—three-ten today! Not bad, huh?"

"Business is fallin' off," Jake said. "People started on vacations already. When do we get ours? Hey, Carly? When do we, huh?"

"Ask the boss. And get a move on 'fore the gang gets here."

"Yah, yah, yah."

"I added wrong," Myhychyk muttered. "Should 'a' been three-six. Hey, Carly, where was the cream line this morning? You couldn't 'a' found it with a microscope. That's bad on collection day."

"Something happened downstairs," Carly said. "I don't know what."

"Yeah, an' who gets hell for it?" Jake demanded. "Us!"

"Three women got mad and wouldn't pay me," Myhychyk agreed. "I'd 'a' had a hundred and twenty bucks otherwise." He rubbed his square chin with a large, dirty hand. "A hundred and eighteen ain't so hot for the first Monday of the month."

His eyes sought the window where a quiet countryside drowsed in a bright warm afternoon. Close to the building, where the ice-cream truck loaded, the grass was sparse, tufted and brown; but, beyond, the lawn ran smoothly as far as the County Road, across which was a field of young wheat, spring-green and vivid, stretching flatly to distant woods.

"Hey, Jake, what about that book? Come on!" Carly said.

"I'd come faster if they had a top to this table you could write on."

But Larsen rose, collected money, sales sheet, and route book from the scarred, warped table, and ambled over to Groce behind a desk at the far end of the room.

"What's the notice say?" Myhychyk asked, pointing to a letterhead thumbtacked to the wallboard.

"Huh? Notice? . . . Oh. I didn't see it before. Lessee. It says, 'Weyland Meadows Dairy, Milk Products Direct from the Farm—'"

"That's the letterhead. What's the notice say?"

"'June 3rd.' That's today—"

"No kidding."

"Shut up. It says, 'Barchi, Goetz, and Bevis: Report to my office together this afternoon,' and it's signed, 'E. D. Thomas, Manager.'"

There was an awkward break in the casual chatter that had filled the room, like the gap on a stage when an actor misses a cue. Jake turned to glance at Myhychyk.

Marty whistled softly. He had a smooth, dark face which was perpetually bland, and his straight short puncture of a mouth rarely betrayed expression; but his eyes, magnified by glasses, now showed a dawning anticipation. "Think they're cuttin' those routes?"

"Lew Barchi's and Ben's?"

"Sure. Like they been saying. Bet they are. Those two routes are oversize, and Lew's been scared they'd be cut; y' heard him talk—"

"Could I help it?" Jake asked. "Man! He won't like this."

Carly said, "Where's this payment for twenty?"

"Twenty?" Jake bent over the route book. "Featherstone? She didn't pay me nothin'. Let's see that sheet. . . . Twenty, twen— Hell, that's twenty-eight! Can't you read?"

"Can't you write?"

"Sure," Myhychyk said. "His own name—in block letters."

Jake made as though to slug him. "God damn you!"

Myhychyk seized the front of his coverall, backed him against the wall, lifting him onto his toes. "What you plannin', pint-size?"

"To brush a fly off your shoulder. It's gone now."

Carly asked, "Where's the money?"

Jake said, "On the desk. Right in front of you. . . . Why don't you sit down and rest, Tarzan? You'll strain yourself."

Marty dropped him and turned away. Jake aimed a kick, then re-

treated hastily, knocking against a table, caroming off it to thud against the opposite wall with a clatter of boots.

Carly said, *sotto voce*, "You'll have the office on your necks."

His nod carried their eyes the length of the room to an inside window through which was visible the cold, reproving face of the farm's book-keeper. Jake wilted; then, turning his back, put a hand over his mouth to hide a smirk. Myhychyk sat down.

Carly said, "Here's your change," and put Larsen's bills into the cash box. "Made your requisition?"

"Naw. I'll do it tonight when I come to work."

"Don't start that again. You know the rules, Jake."

"Oh—O.K., O.K. Where's the pad?"

"You know," Myhychyk said, "cutting routes is a dirty trick when you stop to think. Guy works building one big enough to live on, and, just when he gets it paying, the farm gives a hunk to someone else."

Jake said, "You worryin'?"

"Me? They wouldn't cut mine. They'd better not try to!"

"Ha! What could you do if they did?"

"Hell, I'd go to another dairy and take my customers with me."

"If they'd go."

"Damn right they'd go! Just let Ed Thomas try it, and we'll see!"

"Uh-huh."

"Now Barchi—he's all hot air. But if they monkey with me—"

"Fella it's tough on is Ben."

"Oh—Ben!"

"Whaddaya mean?" Jake demanded, thrusting his teeth forward. "Everybody says that. What's the matter with him?"

"He couldn't sell milk to a hungry baby."

"That makes it all the tougher."

Carly said, "If you guys worked half as hard as Ben Goetz does, we'd be adding a twelfth route instead of a sixth."

"Sure—and what does it get him? A cut—like the rest of us."

Carly nodded. "That's what we said—it's tough."

"He's got that stinkin' Millville territory too," Jake added.

"And he won't say a word. Just go back to work harder'n ever."

"Then he's a sucker!" said Myhychyk. "Hey, who's coming? Lew? . . . Look, don't show him the notice; let him find it. See what happens."

The drivers busied themselves. Feet climbed the stairs unevenly, lingered on the landing; then Lew Barchi came in.

Myhychyk looked up. "Well, hiya, chief!"



Barchi retorted instantly: "Hiya, Chief! How ya doin'?"

"Pretty good, chief! Three hundred and six today. Not bad, huh?"

"Not good either," Barchi said. "What you doing, weaning the route?"

. . . Hiya, Jakey boy! How's life?"

"Like the cheese they give us this morning," Jake said.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Writin' my order."

Barchi hit the table with his fist. "Jesus! You guys make me tired. What good do the damn orders do? They're never put up right. What's the sense to it? . . . Look, Jakey, what time did you start work today?"

"Me? Three, I guess."

"And what time is it now? Almost four! You worked thirteen hours—but are they gonna pay you overtime?"

"They never have."

"You bet not! But they will on the day you wake up to your strength. You got rights same as Thomas. Ain't that so, Chief?"

Myhychyk cried, "You betcha, chief!" and let his eyes drift to the notice. Barchi, his back to it, pounded fist into palm.

"Other places work eight hours a day—some six. Ain't that right? And get time and a half for more! Well, why shouldn't we?"

"I dunno," Jake said. He tore his order slip from the requisition pad and took it to Carly. "There! Hope you're happy."

"And I hope you got it right for once," Carly answered.

"Right? Jesus, how can he get it right," Barchi cried, "when he's been working outdoors thirteen hours and is half asleep? You guys in the office don't think of that, but it's so, ain't it, Chief?"

"You betcha, chief!" Myhychyk said.

"It's the fresh air and sun, driving all day long. You get home, and you're asleep in a minute. Ask any driver!" Barchi glared at Larsen, who stuck his cap on his head but lounged in the doorway expectantly. "Ain't we got enough to do when we come in? Unloading, writing a sales sheet, figuring our points, turning in our money. On top of all that, why should we hafta write orders? Why? Huh? . . . Huh?"

"I dunno," Jake said.

"Who does? They know what we take downstairs, don't they, Chief?"

"You betcha, chief!" Myhychyk said.

"Don't they, Jake? For every day of the week?"

"Yeah." Larsen shifted his weight impatiently.

"Sure. But now they go by the orders—and when you come in, in the morning, and part of your order isn't put up, what happens? It's

your fault. You get bawled out. Why? Because you been overworked till you're too tired to remember something you should of! . . . What's the sense of that, hey, Chief?"

"You betcha, chief!" Myhychyk said.

Barchi glared suspiciously at the bent head. He was a short, slight man with putty-colored hair and skin and a limp that favored his right leg. Bluish gray eyes burned feverishly in the long rectangle of his face, an ugly face dominated by a mouth full of narrow teeth, crowded and yellow. His lips, though very long, splayed apart when he was excited, and froth gathered at their corners. There was froth there now. He said:

"Goddam it, Jake. Why can't we do it like we always did—just go to the box in the morning and tell them what we need?"

Jake Larsen averted his eyes. "Don't bawl me out! I didn't make the rules. What can I do?"

"Plenty—if you had the guts! Hell, we're key men, we drivers! We could get plenty if we worked together."

"A good kick in the butt."

"Jesus! You guys—"

"Oh, for God's sake," Jake snapped, "quit yelling and look around, can'tcha? I'm not gonna wait all day!"

"Huh?" But Lew Barchi was puzzled only a moment. His quick glance at Myhychyk caught a look of expectancy. "What's wrong?" Getting no answer, he looked around. The white letter paper on the yellow wall hit his eye, and he limped over to it, bending to read because it was tacked so low.

As a person will under pressure, he read it at first without understanding. "What's the fuss?" he snapped. "What you watching me for? What's this thing—" No one bothered to answer, and he read it again. "Report to Thomas? . . . Ben and Bevis and—"

He broke off, sucking in his breath. Then his hand shot out, ripping the paper from the wall. "What's this?" He slapped at it with his free hand. "What's the meaning of this, Carly?"

"I do' know."

"You don't, uh? These other two do—don't you? You been hanging around to see what'd happen. You think they're going to cut my route! Well, goddam 'em—" He started for the door, but whirled on the threshold. "By God, any time I'm stinking enough to sit and grin while a guy gets socked in the teeth, I'll go live with a skunk! You think it's funny, sure! But wait till it happens to you."

Jake said: "It's the way they do things, Lew. You can't change it."

"You can't change it!" Barchi mimicked furiously. "By Christ, I don't get you! Even a whammy 'll take the dirty end of the stick once too often."

"A-a-aw!" Myhychyk said.

"O.K. So it's skin off my tail—and skin off Ben's. Some day it'll be skin off yours—and then I'll laugh! . . . I guess you figure I'm out for what I can get. Well, all right—what guy isn't? But, Jesus, get it through your thick skulls: what I want, you want; what I get, you get. We're after the same things, and none of us can get 'em alone!" The impassiveness of their expressions changed his look to contempt. "Oh, hell!" he said. "What's the use?" Turning, he limped across the landing and disappeared through a door marked *Office*.

He left silence behind him. Carly Groce regarded the drivers with a sarcastic smile. Jake looked vaguely uncomfortable, but the Chief seemed unimpressed. He said, after a moment's consideration:

"I must 'a' added my points wrong again. I get three-seven now. Lessee. It was four quarts of B that new customer got; that's where I was off. Makes four points. And a pint of cream makes six, and a pound of butter eight. There. That's better."

"Where's Thomas?"

Wharton Pettitt, looking up from the producers' sheet he was balancing, said coldly, "Inside. Why?" And then, as Barchi limped swiftly to the closed door of the inner office, "He has Mr. Melius with him."

The route man halted suspiciously, then stepped to the bookkeeper's desk and thrust the crumpled paper across it. "What's this?"

Pettitt took the thing, read it, and said precisely, "It's a notice requesting you, Ben Goetz, and Bevis to meet Ed Thomas *together*—"

Barchi barked: "I can read! I wanta know what it means. Are you cutting my route? Mine—and Ben's?"

"That's for Ed to say."

"Goddam it, I want to know! I got a right!"

"Miss Banevsky and I (Pettitt indicated the other occupant of the office, and it was reproof for the blasphemy) have work to do. Suppose you talk to Ed—when the time comes."

"O.K. then!" Whirling furiously, Barchi left the office. The door slammed behind him, and instantly his grating voice exploded through the thin partition: "Whaddaya think? We can't get to see the boss any more! The tin god of the outer office says, 'No!' Getting so we can't

take our pants down without Whart Pettitt's permission!" His fist thudded on a table. "Jesus! It makes me sore."

Pettitt's head turned toward the connecting window.

"Maybe you think we're people?" Barchi cried. "With rights? Ha! Pettitt thinks we're dirt in the gutter—and don't bother hiding it! That's the attitude of the whole goddam office! . . ."

Pettitt turned back to his books. Barchi raved on.

The bookkeeper said calmly: "That man should be fired. He's a troublemaker and a Communist. If Ed would wake up—" His lips thinned over the last words and settled into a tight, straight line, making the prematurely old face grim.

Behind the ground-glass partition which separated the offices, Gerald Melius tossed the dozen sheets of the farm statement onto the desk and settled his two hundred and ten pounds of paunchless, faultlessly clad bulk into the ancient round-backed armchair. "Best April we've had, isn't it?"

He glanced at the watch on his heavy wrist, and Ed Thomas, behind the desk, wondered if he were interested or merely killing time before his game of golf; for Melius was more sportsman than executive, much as he prided himself on his financial acumen and his occasional ventures into Wall Street. One look at his striking, bull-like burliness, his red-gold Florida tan, and you knew that the owner of Weyland Meadows Dairy lived outdoors. And one look at the quality and style of his Palm Beach clothes suggested he had small need to do much else.

"By a long way," Thomas said. "September—perhaps August—should top last year's profit. We'll be making real money."

"Hard to believe I once dropped forty, fifty thousand here regularly."

"Well, delivering sixty-five hundred quarts a day makes a difference! Six years ago you put out what? A hundred and fifty?"

"Very superior milk, though. Sold for a quarter a quart. . . . Six years ago! Lord, it doesn't seem possible fifty thousand was a drop in the bucket six years ago, something to be charged off against the income tax. Today it looks like a damned relief appropriation!"

"You could afford it then. Makes a difference."

"Guess I could still—but I don't want to. And believe me, I didn't think I could then! Seems funny now, the way I tried to get rid of this place. Tried to sell it. Fat chance! Tried to give it away, and couldn't even do that." He shrugged. "What could I do except try to make it pay? Not that I thought it could be done."

"Mr. Wycoff did an amazing job for you. I hope you know it."

"I do! And you've done another."

"I've only carried out the principles Wycoff drilled into me: volume, efficiency, and no frills."

Melius grunted. "Frills! Lord, how I howled when he ruined my thoroughbred herd with grade cows! I swear I hated him. But he did the job! Still, I take nothing from him when I say it needed someone with youth, drive, energy to push us onto the profit side of the books and keep us there. We've grown by leaps and bounds these last three years."

"Merely the crop he sowed, Jerry." Thomas wished Melius had not started this. Everything he said seemed like smirking false modesty, but actually it was his firm belief that Weyland Meadows Dairy was the product and the direct responsibility of a man he admired and respected.

The owner considered him quizzically. "All right, be shrinking! But I hear things—and can use my eyes and brains."

Edward Darnley Thomas made a face. He knew from attentions received that he was considered locally as a coming young businessman; but he had too little faith in himself, despite outer assurance, to relish the role. He was a short, pudgy man of thirty-six with one of those figures which trousers never quite fit, and a round, small-featured, pink face given character by a sprinkling of freckles. Beside Melius's polished metropolitanism he might have looked inexperienced, colorless, even immature; but actually he did not look nor feel so. He felt, rather, like a practical businessman beside a dilettante—a virtuous feeling; and he could discount Jerry's money with a shrug, knowing that he would have his own some day—not as much, but enough—and that it would be earned.

Melius was saying: "Tell me—of those sixty-five hundred quarts, how many are on our own routes?"

"Fifteen hundred, more or less. Three of our five routes run better than three hundred points apiece. As of today. Tomorrow we'll have six, with only one over three hundred."

"How's that?"

"Two are too big. Three-fifty, three-sixty points each. We're cutting them. They stop growing when they're that size. Take too long to deliver, too long to collect, and the driver hasn't the energy or the time to do selling. Moreover they pay too well; he gets satisfied."

"What do you do? Lop some off? Give it to someone else?"

"Um. The routes are adjacent, so we'll take a hundred points from each and make a new route between them."

"I should think the drivers would kick like hell."

"We-ell—" Ed shrugged. "We guarantee them—for six months—their average earnings for the six months preceding the cut."

"I see. They've that long to fill the route up again?"

"With a threat of less pay eventually if they don't. Yes. The system has its faults, but it's about the only way a dairy can grow. Theoretically it keeps a driver on his toes, looking for new business—"

"Um—and theoretically you could cut routes every six or eight months, keeping wages at peak pay yet growing all the time."

"That's the idea—subject to limitations of territory. But we've such a rotten bunch of salesmen it doesn't work!"

"I've wondered." Melius shifted his position, leaning forward. "I brought it up because I wanted to ask why our dealer business has grown so fast and our retail has lagged? Is it simply poor salesmanship? . . . We've what? About twenty dealers?"

"Nineteen."

"And only five routes. Yet the routes had a head start. They were our original outlet. Why is it, then?"

Thomas's fingers automatically sought the paper knife on the desk. "Hard question, Jerry. . . . For one thing, our dealers are in the metropolitan area while our own routes are limited to this city. And there were three large milk companies and several smaller ones here before us. We've had to grow at their expense—"

"You would anywhere."

"Yes, but in a small city there's a marked loyalty to one's milkman. He's a neighbor, not a colossus of industry—like Eastern Dairies, for instance. It's a personal relationship. And another thing: when we take on those already established dealers up yonder our sales jump two and three hundred quarts at a clip, which gives an illusion of rapid growth even though the individual dealers may be growing no more swiftly than our individual routes."

"I was wondering," Melius said, "why we bother with routes. Why not concentrate on dealers?" It was a proposal.

The paper knife twiddled. "I'd rather not. There's Fred Quinlan."

"Quinlan—who hauls the milk?"

"Yes, but he's more than a trucker, though we pay him better than two hundred a week in hauling. Fred was our first dealer, and he's directly responsible for fifteen of our present nineteen. He's our agent, bill collector, chief salesman. And, to tell the truth, I'm scared to death of him!"

"Why?"

"Because the dealer business is in his hands completely. If he ever got sore, he could switch the lot of them away from us as easily as he brought them to us. I handle him as I would dynamite."

"But there's no actual danger of that, surely."

"No. He's a better booster for Weyland Meadows than most of our own drivers and always has been, but— Well, I want to hang onto those retail routes as a backlog. In case."

"Would they keep us making money even if the dealer business went?"

"We-ell—after readjustment. At least they'd save us from complete disaster, give us a foundation on which to rebuild."

"O.K.," Melius said. "I just wanted to know."

"Actually, nothing of the kind'll happen, Jerry. In fact, I'm expecting a boom in that direction. Right now Quinlan's angling for a dealer who'll bring us six hundred quarts of new business plus a mess of school half-pints during the winter. And that brings me to a point I've mentioned before. . . . Have you time?"

Melius had glanced at his watch again. "I'm due at the first tee at five-fifteen—this is too good a day to waste indoors; but I've a few minutes still. What is it? That new creamery again?" The blue eyes twinkled cheerfully. "I've heard about it ever since Wycoff's day."

"Wycoff knew what he was talking about."

"Now I could understand it if it was a new office you wanted."

Thomas gestured with impatience. Jerry was kidding him, and he hated being kidded. The offices were old, yes, and a very unpleasant daffodil yellow; the flat brown of the unpatterned linoleum, moreover, went badly with the reddish stain of the woodwork, and the few furnishings were ancient and ugly. But that wasn't important.

"Rotten place to do business," Melius said. "Doesn't impress people. You need more space, a deep rug, an impressive big desk— What's that old thing? Wycoff's roll-top with the superstructure shorn off?"

Ed shrugged. "Let's do the important things first and worry about impressiveness later. The plant's vital to growth, and the office isn't. I tell you, Jerry, the problem downstairs is critical. We're already using our pasteurizers as holding tanks, the men work well over eight hours—"

"Won't hurt 'em."

"No, but the fact remains, we're close to capacity."

"Put a figure to it."

"Well, with the present pay roll and equipment, ten thousand quarts."

"That's still thirty-five hundred away."

"Yes, but it might be twenty-nine hundred tomorrow if Quinlan's new dealer comes through. . . . And, Jerry, a creamery isn't built overnight. Even putting an architect to work today, we wouldn't be in before February or March—and by then we'll have to be in!"

"Suppose we put new equipment in the present plant?"

"And add a second shift? and a new wing to house more holding tanks? and another to house a new icebox? and perhaps a third to house new refrigeration and heating units? . . . Well, we might bottle fourteen, sixteen thousand quarts with that set-up. But a new plant aimed at an ultimate capacity of twice or three times that would get you more for your money."

"And would cost fifty thousand bucks. Don't forget I'm seeing none of this profit you keep talking about. Not that I want to. But why should I sell stocks that are bringing in income and stuff the money into a gopher hole that'll net me nothing?"

"Suppose you financed only part of the expansion." Thomas leaned forward to open the April statement. "See that figure? That's no theoretical profit, no bookkeeping figure. That's money in the bank—"

Melius said quickly, "And see this? That's accounts payable."

"Current! April bills only—no holdovers. Our cash figure has grown steadily, Jerry—and 'll grow even faster from now on. By December we'll have enough to pay half, or at least two-fifths, of this expansion. If you advanced the rest, we could treat it as a loan—with interest, if you liked—"

"You make me feel like a tight-fisted banker," Melius said. "Good God, I don't want anything out of here! I merely don't want to lose. I've never asked for interest on any money I've put in here—"

"I know. But treat this aside from the other capital—as a different kind of transaction, as a loan. After all, I could get it from a bank, except that—naturally—you don't want me to. But give me the same break I'd get if I did! . . . We're at a crossroads, Jerry. We have a destiny to fulfill. We're a coming dairy and could become a really big one if we aren't strangled here and now. I want to see us grow and keep growing, not stop just as we gain momentum. . . . And makeshift arrangements will be only a waste of money. In a year, two years, we might finance a plant all by ourselves; but we can't wait! We'll need one now well before it's ready."

Melius looked at his watch again. "I have to get along."

"What bothers you, Jerry? Why hesitate? Surely you can't want us;



to stop where we are? And *could* we stop, and stay in the black? Can any business stand still? I don't see your position—"

Melius answered slowly: "There are lots of reasons. The damned government. A businessman can't tell where he stands. Oh, don't get me started on that, or I won't make my golf game. I'll think it over." He rose. Ed Thomas did too, reluctantly. "By the way," Melius added, "that's a new girl in the office, isn't it? Haven't seen her before."

"Swan Ellis's second cousin—I think—by marriage. Remember Swan—the farm manager? I live with him. Well, we've hired a new man to help Whart, and Miss Banevsky is filling in till he comes. Wednesday."

"Why not give her the job? She's cute." He chuckled at Thomas's expression. "You never know an armful when you see it, Ed! You never did. You're no credit to the name of bachelor."

"'Armful' is the word. And you can have it! . . . Anyway, Pettitt doesn't like girls in the office. Even when Sonia worked here before her marriage to Ben Goetz, the driver, Whart objected. Claims girls aren't efficient—which I heartily disputed, in Sonia's case."

"Efficient or not, they're nice. Take a man's mind off his work."

"Probably what Whart objects to!"

"Growing old, poor guy." Melius put his hand on the doorknob. "Oh, that—What's his name—the producer we've been buying milk from? Ledmuller. Has he paid anything on that money he borrowed?"

"No luck. He's stubborn as a fool. Afraid we're stuck."

"Not as long as he has assets! Most men I wouldn't press, but I've a feeling he never intended to pay us from the first, and I'm going to see that he does! . . . Keep after him."

He opened the door, stepping into the outer office. With a casual word to Wharton Pettitt and a glance at Bet Banevsky who smiled at him, he went on out and down the stairs, Thomas following at his heels.

## II

Crossing the lawns from her father's house, Freda Ellis walked slowly. She should have been hurrying, for the boys—her small brothers—would be home soon, yelling for their afternoon bread and jelly; but with the sun warm on her back it was just impossible. She loved the sun, and what with school and housework saw little of it.

From the concrete apron at the side of the creamery, she waved a flirtatious hand at the men in the ice-cream room, then skipped around to the building's rear where Ed Thomas's Ford coupé and Melius's big Buick convertible were parked, and ran, with her yellow hair flying, up the two cement steps to the landing, past the door giving onto the office stairs, and through the wooden windscreen to the loading platform. Here, for a second, she hesitated, thinking ruefully of her white skirt and shoes.

Cases, in stacks higher than her head, were everywhere, and only a narrow alleyway had been left between them. The floor was soaking. Where the reinforced concrete was chipped, little pockets of dirty water had gathered, and a cake of ice nearly as tall as herself was adding to them rapidly in the heat. Flypaper strips, black with victims, spiraled and swung in the occasional breeze while myriad flies still uncaught buzzed noisily. An acid odor of milk hung in the warm air. Two steps down to the left, in a room barely wide enough for it, stood the bottle-washing machine, rumbling methodically, adding a heavy, deafening undertone to the banging of cases and the rattling of bottles. Beyond, in the bottling room, red tile gleamed wetly and a suspended maze of sanitary piping was like a great spider's web.

At the far end of the platform where the icebox was, she could hear the voice of Kenny Ihloff. To reach him there was nothing for it but to thread the alleyway. Freda gathered her skirts about her and trod carefully.

Ihloff was unloading Ben Goetz's truck, but glanced up at her approach, his mouth ajar exposing mouse-gray teeth without divisions. His eyes were distorted and vague behind heavy lenses.

Freda said, "I want a pound of butter, Kenny, please."

"Yeah, yeah. Just a *minute*. Look out the way."

A case racketed across the cement and moisture sprayed.

Ben Goetz, inside the truck, raised an awkward finger in greeting, and his smile was a sharp V. "Hi, Freda. How's my girl?"

She answered shyly, feeling she was too old to be addressed like that, yet not really annoyed. You could never take offense with Ben, but only feel sorry for him. He was a thin, narrow-shouldered man with a weary stoop and a gaunt face, deeply marked. Lines crinkled about his eyes, and deep parentheses framed a tentative smile which might flower with a sort of shy eagerness, or be as easily crushed.

Ihloff bawled, "Hey! Get on the ball. What else you got?"

Ben straightened with an effort and sighed. "I'm tired."

"So'm I! But what else ya got? Come on. Let's get through."

"Two pints of heavy."

"What's the matter? That's all you took out." And at the shrug: "Lots of it come back today. Ain't nobody usin' any." He marked it down.

"That's the sour batch we put out Friday. Here. Gimme a hand."

"What's a matter? Y' crippled?"

Freda looked away.

Another door at this end of the platform let her see into the bottle-washing room again, and she watched dirty bottles being taken out of their cases and slammed on the rack. Every few seconds the machine swallowed a batch, and every few seconds it spewed out a set of glistening clean ones which a conveyor chain carried in a shiny parade through the partition to the bottling room.

Once Freda had looked this far she caught sight of Amos Vliet and looked hastily away. Amos was the bottler, and there was no reason why she shouldn't look at him or he at her except that she was vaguely and causelessly afraid of him. He was big and young and so hard-muscled that she felt not even metal could dent him; and he stirred some unnamable apprehension within her.

While she waited, Steve Ochs, the plant manager, came sidling through the cases. His olive skin, dark hair, and thin black mustache looked pure Mediterranean; but there was nothing of the easy-going Latin in his temperament, the shape of his square head, or his hard, one-sided, malicious grin. He started to speak to Ihloff but caught sight of Ben in the truck, and his eyes lit.

"Hiya, Ben! Heard the bad news?"

Goetz looked startled. "Bad news? . . . No. What?"

"They're cuttin' your route." Rocking back on his heels, Steve waited, lips parted as though to smile, eyes mocking. "Yours and Lew's. They're making a new one."

Ben started to say something and didn't. After a minute he sat down on the case rack.

"Hit you?" Steve asked. "I'll bet! Barchi's been raising hell."

"Yeah. . . . I can imagine. . . . Of course they have to do it. It's the only way we can grow, but—"

Steve grinned sardonically.

"—it'll be tough. My territory's not much good. . . . I'm glad, though, they're adding a new route. A sixth route. It's swell. It's the way to grow. We'll be catching up with Keystone next."

"Sure," Steve said. "Anything's possible while guys are suckers."

His little experiment in shock completed, he swung on Ihloff. "Petitt been around lately?"

"Yeah. Hey! He says we were ninety-six quarts of Vitamin D short yesterday."

"So I hear." Ochs thrust his hands into his hip pockets, arching his back. "Eight cases is a lot of Vitamin D. Nearly all we bottle."

"Yeah. I told him so. I told him we couldn't be short so much." The weak eyes searched Steve's dark face. "I told him maybe the bottling figure was wrong. I think he's in talkin' to Amos."

Steve shot a glance toward the inner creamery, a queer delight in his half-smile. "Funny. Amos don't know a thing about it. Says maybe you counted the inventory wrong—or else it was dumped."

"The inventory was O.K.," Ihloff stated with sudden heat. "I only count what's there, see? I—"

"Sure, sure. No guy good enough to work for me would make a fool mistake like that." Steve fetched him a clout on the shoulder which staggered him. "Ain't that right, papa? . . . Hey, Ben!"

"Uh—what?" Ben, who had been sitting in dull immobility on the case rack of his truck, looked up startled.

"Y' heard about Kenny? He's gonna be a daddy! . . . Surprise, huh? You wouldn't think it possible, to look at him!"

"A-a-aw!" Kenny said, grinning.

Ben rose slowly. A sharp smile lit his face for the first time since Steve had mentioned route cutting. "Well, man! Whyn't you tell somebody! That's swell! When's the big day?"

The dull, unseparated teeth were all visible. "December."

"We're celebrating," Steve said. "Having a party for Papa Ihloff Thursday night. How about it? Comin' over?"

"At your house?" Ben said. "I—I'd like to, Steve. If it isn't too tough a day—"

"Aw, you can miss an evening's sleep. What's the matter? Ain't every day Brother Ihloff achieves such heights! . . . Yeah, an' what about you, Freda? Time you came to a party, isn't it?"

"Me?" Freda was startled. She was vaguely surprised at Steve's knowing her name; that he had invited her to a party—one of the farm parties which had piqued and fascinated her by the very fact that she had been "too young" to go to them—was unbelievable.

"Sure. Why not? You're grown up now and getting to be quite a girl. My boy Duke comes. Why shouldn't you?"

Freda's eyes were shining. "Oh, I'd love to—honestly! Only—"

"Only what?"

"Dad might not let me."

"Ah, sure he will! Why shouldn't he? Tell him your invitation comes right from me. Tell him you've grown up and it's time you had some fun. I'll take care of you. All the farm'll be there!"

"Oh, if I only could! It's wonderful just to be asked. I'll try—"

Steve said: "Oops, here's Pettitt. What was it you wanted? Butter?"

"Oh, yes, please! I'd almost forgotten—"

"Sure!" Steve disappeared into the box.

Pettitt, finicking his way down the platform, was seething. "Thloff," he said, "those Vitamin D quarts must have been dumped!"

"Naw! . . . What's a matter? Don't Amos know what was bottled?"

The bookkeeper made a furious sound; then, as the plant manager emerged from the icebox and handed Freda her butter, he barked, "Steve! What do you know of this?"

"What? Be with you in a minute, Whart. Got to mark up this butter 'fore I forget it."

Steve whirled away. At the far end of the platform he paused at the register to scribble "Ellis" on the name line and "1 but" across the sales space, but still managed to be off the dock, down the steps, and halfway across the drive toward the garage before Freda, following, emerged through the windscreen.

Her thoughts spinning with the surprise of the invitation, the girl hurried home. The boys, she found, were not yet there; so she put the butter in the refrigerator and went up to her room. There were a dozen things she ought to be doing, but for just a few moments she wanted to sit alone and think about the wonderful thing which had happened to her.

The little community that was Weyland Meadows Dairy had few social diversions; but fortnightly during the winter, or on special excuse, one or another of the farm families entertained. They were curiously mixed parties which included anyone from Ed Thomas himself down through the department heads and the drivers to Pop Haas from the barns; anyone might come, regardless of job. And yet they were as curiously exclusive: certain families and certain individuals—for reasons sufficient to the community—were never invited. Above all, they were adult parties, and this as much as anything had made them alluring to Freda Ellis. She had only the vaguest idea what they were like, though she had camped in the upper hall listening when they had been given at the Ellis home. But, without a hostess, how could they be as nice here as they must be elsewhere?

She had looked forward to her first invitation for ages. In a way, it had become a symbol marking the day she would be accepted as grown up. Of course she *was* grown up, but older people, she found, grasped the obvious rather slowly. Now it had happened, and Thursday would be the day. In imagination she had lived it before, countless times, its details changing as she embroidered and elaborated the vision; but always it was a personal triumph—in some ill defined way—and always wonderful.

Now it might come true—if—

If her father didn't object.

There was no reason why he should, of course. He went to the parties himself, when he could, and enjoyed them. Of course he would let her go!

But, beneath the confidence, Freda wondered. Swan still considered her a little girl, as he made amply clear from time to time; and it always made her furious. Here she had kept house for him, taken care of him and of the boys, for the four years since her mother had died; here she was doing woman's work—

She *was* a woman. She was grown up!

Goodness, he should be able to see it just by looking at her!

On impulse, she bounced across to the dressing table, slipped down before the mirror, and inspected herself.

The result was not too satisfying. She did look young.

More than that, she had two pimples!

They had been there that morning, but she had forgotten: one on the chin, one over the left eye—and they'd only just started. Would they be gone by Thursday? Or—worse still—would there be others by then? They always came in batches. Her happiness fled. She would be covered with pimples—absolutely covered with them!—by Thursday night. The party would be ruined.

The oval face in the mirror was suddenly miserable, and the full, soft lips trembled. Freda was at an age when pimples can be tragedy. A girl of medium height, she was pure blonde—eyes, hair, and complexion—with features attractive in their youth, shyness, and immaturity. She was coltish; but her lightness of touch, the childish hop in her walk, the frothy weightlessness of every movement promised eventual grace. There were already intimations of womanhood, but she was still a child.

For a few long moments the blemishes to her complexion threatened to spoil the whole lovely, exciting day; but then she began to wonder

if her hair, of which there was so much hanging fluffy and light to her shoulders, wasn't what made her look so young. Gathering the mass of it in her hands, she swept it back and up on either side of her head in a wild experiment. The effect was startling. The fine strands leapt from her temples like soft wings and she looked like something out of a movie—actually! Her face seemed naked, thinner, but—yes!—older. Oh, if she could only keep it so!

She was struggling with hairpins and a comb when the screen banged downstairs and the boys clattered into the kitchen.

Oh, dear! . . . Well, she couldn't do much with it now anyway. There was too much of it. It would have to be cut.

A twinge of doubt assailed her. Cutting it seemed drastic. Suppose she didn't like it the new way? Suppose she looked funny?

"Fre-e-eda! Hey, Freda! where's our eats?"

And could she explain to Mr. Giuseppe, the barber on Walnut Street, how she wanted it? He'd laugh. He liked to jolly her, never seeming to notice how she hated it. And all his men customers would look at her and grin too.

Suppose— What if she went to a real beauty parlor!

It was a bold thought. Beauty parlors belonged to the world of older women, elegant, expensive women. She'd have to find some little inexpensive place—

"Fre-e-eda!" Kit's strident treble.

—and she didn't know any, was diffident about asking. She'd be diffident about going in, too, when the time came; she hated doing new things. And then there was the money question . . .

Her enthusiasm began to evaporate. There were too many difficulties and she'd probably look silly in that kind of hair-do anyway.

"Fre-e-eda! Fre-e-eda!" Carroll's voice joining Kit's.

Freda shouted, "I'm coming!" and took out the pins, ran a comb through the snarls, and settled her hair with a shake of the head. Then she hopped up and hurried downstairs.

"Gee, where you been?" Kit demanded. "We're starved!"

"I want peanut butter!" Willie was often too old for jelly.

"I want strawberry jam," Carroll said.

Kit, who was seven and the youngest, wanted both, and the other boys reconsidered simultaneously. "I'll have both too!" "Me too!"

Freda found the bread, butter, jam, milk, and peanut butter. She poured the milk first so they would have something to keep them busy.

Kit, his first impatience satisfied, took his glass to the window over-

looking the kitchen garden. "Hurry up, guys. We can't hang around all day. I gotta see if my corn's up."

Carroll scoffed. "Y' only put it in two days ago."

"I did not! It's been in more'n a week. Dad said one warm sunny day 'd bring it up—and this is warm and sunny, ain't it? That's good corn. I saved the best ears there were last year. You'll see!"

"Bet it won't come up at all," Willie said.

"What you want to grub in the dirt for anyhow?" Carroll demanded. "Hey, Freda! Hurry up. We wanta play sometime this after."

"Let's play telegraph," Willie said. "I got it all fixed—huh, Freda?—so's I can send real messages from the attic to the cellar."

"Yes," Freda said with slight acidity. "I saw the wire."

"I'm stringing one clear to the Ochses' so Perce and me can send each other messages. Least if I can get it 'cross the drive."

Kit said: "Hey, sis, those radishes look big enough to eat. You tried 'em?"

"No, but I will. . . . Here's your bread and jam, now."

Kit abandoned the window.

"Don't bolt it. Eat slowly."

"I wanta get out," he said, bolting it, "and see about my corn."

There was a moment of comparative silence. Willie nudged Kit. "Hey, Freda—what you gonna say a week from Friday?"

The stream of milk refilling Carroll's glass splashed and spilled. Freda hastily set the pitcher down. "A week from Friday?"

Willie grinned. "Uh-huh. Graduation." He was a nice-looking kid beginning—at twelve—to develop. Quiet humor lay deep behind steady, level eyes and twirled the corners of a short-lipped mouth.

Carroll began the immemorial chant: "Freda's going to spe-eak! Freda's going to spe-eak!"

The girl's head went up. "How did you find out?"

"Aw, we know!" Kit grinned proudly. "It's all over every place."

"What you going to say?" Willie asked again.

"Bet you're so scared your knees shake! Bet you forget what you're s'posed to sa-y! Freda's going to spe-eak!"

"It isn't everyone in this family who'll be valedictorian of their class," Freda said sweetly. "You'd better be proud of me!"

Carroll said, "What if you don't pass your finals now?"

"I'll pass. They don't count, though. It's all decided."

Willie asked, "Who's the brightie who'll speak for the boys?"

"Ernie Schaffer. But I'm the real valedictorian."



All three youngsters whooped. "You and Sissy Schaffer!" Willie jeered. "On a platform together!"

"Wilfred won't like it!" Carroll taunted.

Kit said, "Who's Wilfred?"

"Freda's boy friend, of course."

Freda could ignore this because it wasn't true. She was even a bit flattered. "Who wants more milk?"

"Look!" Carroll accused. "She's blushing. Freda's in lo-ove!"

Freda remained serene, and Willie said, "Let's go play telegraph."

Kit cried, "Let's look at my corn."

"You and your corn! How 'bout you, Carroll?"

"Look at Freda: she's blushing!"

"Hey, Freda," Willie said desperately, "you play with me, huh?"

"I have to bake a cake, Willie. I'm sorry."

"She's got to learn to cook so Wilfred'll marry her." Carroll made a long, high chant of it. "Freda's in lo-ove! She and Ernie Schaffer are gonna speak together and make Wilfred jea-lous!"

"Oh, shut up!" The singsong was getting on the girl's nerves.

Willie said, "Maybe I'll build a racing car. I saw a model—"

"If you guys 'd help, I could make a garden three times as big!"

"Garden! Aw, you'll grow out of it! I used to like gardens too."

Kit was hurt.

Freda said swiftly: "Kit darling, don't pay any attention! You stick to gardening. One of you ought to take after your dad."

"A-a-aw!" said Carroll. "He's dad's favorite. He likes seeds!"

"You mustn't say that. Daddy has no favorites!"

Carroll was ten and pretty obnoxious sometimes. He was regarding her slyly now.

"You got a pimple!"

Freda's lips thinned dangerously.

"What's a pimple?" Kit asked.

"Those things on her face," Carroll said. "She's got two."

"But what are they?"

"Pimples, dope!"

Freda cried, "Stop saying that word!"

Carroll stared, then said, "Pimples!" experimentally.

The girl flew at him, and he fled, singing, "Pim-ples! Pim-ples! Freda's full of pim-ples! Wilfred won't like pim-ples! She'll look like a warthog when she speaks at graduation all covered with pim-ples!"

Freda ran. Carroll stopped both flight and song, and there was sur-

prised silence. Then Willie shouldered his younger brother into a corner. "Hey, you! You made her cry!"

Carroll was momentarily contrite: "How'd I know she would?"

"Well, quit teasing her, see? I'll knock your ears down!"

"You and what football team?"

"Try it and see, smarty!"

After a moment Carroll's eyes fell. He said, "A-a-a-aw!"

### III

BET BANEVSKY was alone in the office when a young man appeared at the top of the stairs. Attracted by the excitement in the drivers' room where Barchi was pounding the table, this stranger had paused on the landing so that Bet had a good chance to look him over. She was impressed. She admired his hard, sharply cut masculine handsomeness, his thinness too—she who was plump herself; and she liked the arrogant cock of his head, the jaunty set of his shoulders which made his mere medium height seem greater.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked a shade breathlessly.

Cold eyes met hers, slipped down over button nose and broad, full-lipped mouth, over the short smooth cylinder of her throat and the wide shoulders of which she was proud, till, with climactic purpose, they reached her high breast, prominent under a clinging sweater, and there lingered coolly.

"Thomas?" His lips moved before and after the word as though he were speaking a full sentence, but what emerged was a mere sullen mumble so that she wondered what had made him angry.

"Mr. Thomas is downstairs. He'll be right back if you'll sit down."

With a little grunt, he stepped in and did so.

She waited to see if he'd say any more, then turned back to the Quinlan dealers' bills which were the regular Monday job. Nevertheless she remained conscious of him. He was listening to Barchi in the next room; but his attention, like hers, was divided, and she felt his eyes now and then. They had a tactual impact.

She kept wishing he'd say something, but it was she who asked finally, "Does Mr. Thomas expect you?"

He nodded curtly, and she felt rebuffed; but then he added, "Roane,"

and she didn't know what to feel. Apparently it was his natural way of talking. She wondered if he ever strung two words together.

Petitt returned, carrying the icebox sheet, and he was angry. At sight of Roane, however, he controlled himself and said merely, "You're the new driver"—making a statement of it. "Roane? Harold Roane? What do they call you? Hal?"

The other nodded.

Petitt glanced into the drivers' room, where Barchi was making an unholy fuss, and added: "Mr. Thomas will be up in a minute, but you'll have to wait. The relief man isn't here yet."

Roane didn't say anything. Petitt looked at him sharply, then returned to his work. There was silence till Ed Thomas appeared, having seen Melius off. The bookkeeper introduced them, but then followed Ed into his office with the icebox sheet. They heard him say: Eight cases of Vitamin D! Lost. Misaid. Not even that lot downstairs can be that careless! I tell you, something's wrong down there. Look at this."

"Oh, Lord!" Ed Thomas was disgusted and annoyed. "Whart, I can't think there's anything— God knows the bookkeeping in the box is a problem, but it's because Ihloff is so hard to handle—"

"Steve knows how!" Petitt said, and then the door closed.

In the outer office there was silence except for Barchi's voice and the clatter of Bet's adding machine. It was quite a while before Roane said, "Stenographer here?"

She smiled. "Temporarily. The boy who worked here left, and I'm filling in. A new one comes Wednesday."

She was disappointed when he said no more. She worked half-heartedly at a bill which would not check, hoping he would continue, but the minutes dragged out vainly. She had nearly given up hope when he asked abruptly, "Married?"

She was startled but said, "No-o," with an upward glance and an upward inflection. He ignored them, and there was silence again.

It was she who broke it this time: "Are you?"

His eyes mocked her. "Married? . . . No."

It was five minutes before Petitt returned. He caught Bet idling, and his voice was as chill and cutting as jagged ice. "Are your bills done, Miss Banevsky?"

"No, I— Not yet. I've had trouble."

"What's the matter? Mistakes? Or can't you recall procedure since you were here last? Or have you merely dawdled?"

Bet felt her face flame. "Well, prices have changed—"

"But you have a list, haven't you? I made one out. The dealers are listed, and after their names the price to be charged for each item. Didn't you get it? . . . Then what's wrong? Can't you list and add seven tickets and figure a total without lost motion or waste of time?"

"It's the prices," she protested defensively. "The eleven-and-a-half ones. And the seven and five-eighths or seven-eighths—"

"Didn't you get as far as fractions in school? And haven't you an adding machine? It isn't as though you had to figure them in your head; that would be too much, I know. But is it too much to ask the modern girl to put a few figures on a keyboard correctly?"

What would she have done, he asked, if she had lived back when there were no adding machines and a bookkeeper had to earn his salt? It had been a specialized profession then. Nowadays you could pick a laborer out of a ditch and make a mathematician of him. But not a girl—oh, no! Their heads were too full of men . . .

Bet sat miserably beneath his contempt, thinking how awful it was to be bawled out before a stranger. She hated Pettitt and his cold superiority. She had always loathed office work anyway, hated it! The day would come when there would be no more of it. Once she was married, her man would work for the family while she stayed home and read magazines all day or went to the movies. Once she was married . . .

Most of her daydreams involved marriage.

Bill Bevis rescued her. Bill was relief driver, a burly man with no neck and a funny, grinning, perfectly round head set between his shoulders like a pea in a spoon. It was studded with eyes almost lost in heavy dark-red flesh but bright as diamonds.

Pettitt remarked, "So you decided to come finally? This is Roane."

Bill tittered; from so beefy a man it sounded odd, but it was his way. "Hi! I'm Bevis. Come on: let's get this over. Hey, Barchi!"

Pettitt said, "Ben's still on the platform."

"No, he's comin' up. I saw him. . . . Hey, Lew—come on!"

He led Roane into Thomas's office.

Barchi stormed in and paused to slap Pettitt's desk. "You're back of this route cutting, Whart. You ain't fooling me a bit! You're out for my scalp, hoping to get rid of me. Well, all right. There's nothing I can do alone, but some day you'll cut one route too many and have hell on your hands!"

"They're waiting for you," Pettitt said coldly.

"I'm warning you." Barchi flung away. Bet could hear him start on

Thomas as soon as he got through the doorway: "Ed, look! I'm not complaining. I'm taking my cut. But it's not right. It's not fair to a driver. You told this new guy how his route 'll be taken from him soon's he gets it built up?"

Ben Goetz appeared on the landing and was waved impatiently in. He gathered himself visibly, squaring his slumped shoulders, but his feet dragged as he crossed the floor to the inner office.

Ten minutes passed while from beyond the closed door came the steady murmur of talk, topped intermittently by the harsh nagging of Lew Barchi. Words were indistinguishable.

Bet had completed one bill and was well along on another when there was the sound of more steps on the stairs outside, and Boo Fusek from the cow barns appeared on the landing. Boo was a short, pasty youth in a dirty white coverall with a flattened face and a happy-go-lucky smile. He entered, bobbing apologetically and thrusting a once-white linen cap tentatively toward Pettitt with both hands.

"Hey, Whart—hiya?"

Pettitt nodded slightly, and Boo shuffled.

"Could I—huh—have a new cap?"

The bookkeeper gave him a skeptical look but got him one from the corner closet. Fusek tossed his dirty headgear into the waste basket and set the new at a jaunty angle, still making no move to go.

Pettitt looked expectant. "Something more, Boo?"

"Well—could I—uh— Aw, hell, you know what I'm a-lookin' fer!"

"Do I?"

"Shucks, yes!" They faced each other, the chill bookkeeper and the embarrassed barn hand. "How 'bout a little advance?"

"I see!" Grimly. "And what would you say the date was?"

"The date? Why, 'bout the 3rd of June?"

"The 3rd—well, well! And when were you paid?"

"Shucks, Whart! Y'-all know we got paid the 1st!"

"The 1st—two days ago? And you want an advance already?"

"Well—damn! Twenty-three cents don't last long."

"Twenty-three— Oh, yes, I remember! But probably you realize why your check was no larger? You had too much advance last month."

"Well, a guy's gotta live! He's gotta eat!"

Pettitt seemed about to ask why, but said merely, "Yes, and it takes something to run a car."

"Uh-huh! . . . How about it, huh? Fi' bucks."

"Have you got it coming?"

"Sure!" Petitt looked anything but sure, and Fusek added, aggrieved, "I worked three days a'ready this month."

"Two and two-thirds. That's five dollars and thirty-three cents. Now what have you bought? Gas? Milk? Butter?"

"Aw, Whart! You act like I was figgerin' to quit on you—"

"How much will you have coming at month's end at this rate?"

"'Bout twenty-three cents minus," Boo said. In spite of his awkward shyness, Bet thought, he wasn't really awed by Wharton Petitt.

The bookkeeper reached for the advance pad and tossed it across. "What will this five dollars go for? Rent? Where are you living now?"

"The other side of the farm. At a place over there."

The advance pad came back, Boo's signature scrawled on the bottom line.

Petitt filled in the rest. "What if I wrote 'seven dollars' instead of 'five'—and pocketed the difference? Would it teach you not to sign a blank?"

"Shucks, Whart, I know you're honest! You're nasty sometimes, but when it comes to money—Aw, hell!"

Petitt snorted, counting five ones out of the cash box at his elbow. Boo took them and started to back out.

"Oh, Boo—in the future, please don't come here directly from the barns."

The boy looked blank.

"Miss Banevsky must find the odor as objectionable as I."

Fusek's unhealthy skin achieved pinkness, and he shot a painful glance at Bet whose eyes were down in acute embarrassment. He mumbled, "Yeah. Yeah. Sure. Sorry!"

When he had gone, Petitt muttered: "I wish I knew why barn boys are so improvident. As a group no other department can equal them. Advance, advance, advance! Not one has the sense to budget his income. . . . Matter of intelligence, I suppose. Men who do that kind of work for that kind of pay haven't the character to plan. . . . H'm! Where did he say he was living? I don't believe he did say. Do you know?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Bet said.

"Umph! . . . You finishing those bills tonight or tomorrow?"

Bet boiled. Who had been asking the questions anyway? Gee, did he expect her to listen and figure fractions at the same time?

Presently there was a scraping of chairs in Ed's office, and the door opened. Bevis came out first, Roane and Ben Goetz on his heels. The girl's eyes sought Hal's, but he wasn't looking her way.

Bevis was saying, "You guys come on in the drivers' room, and we'll work this out. Hey, Lew—come on! Jawing ain't gettin' you nowhere. . . . Roane, you figure to start work tonight?"

Hal leaned on the corner of Bet's desk. The girl wished he would look down at her, but he didn't.

"Bill—" Ben said. "Hey, Bill!"

"We'll start about four," Bevis said. "Be here by three-thirty. Once you got the route learned you won't have to load that early; but tonight we'll hafta find the best way to run it. Hey, Lew, come on!"

"Bill, the Zeiglers— Can I keep the Zeiglers? They—"

"Zeiglers? They're over the line in Roane's territory—"

"But they're personal friends, one of my first customers, Bill. Can't I keep 'em? I don't mind going out of the way, and they won't like it, having someone else bring their milk."

"Can't! If I start making exceptions, the whole thing'll be a hash." Bill tittered. "Lew'd claim everyone on his route was a first customer and an old friend! . . . Hey, Lew, what's a matter?"

"Oh, can it," Barchi said. "I'm here."

Bevis started for the drivers' room with Ben on his heels. "But, Bill, they've been at my house. They buy extras and give me a lot of new accounts—"

Barchi said to Roane, "Feller, you're stepping on a treadmill. You'll work your heart out here—long hours, piddling pay—and for what? Take my advice: scram before you get stuck. Hey, Ben! Ain't that right? You can't even keep your old friends, can you?"

Roane, grunting, turned to pick up the hat he had left on Bet's desk, and his eyes flicked down at her like a snake's tongue.

"Where d'ya live, sister?"

Bet's throat was suddenly tight. "Tenth."

"Number?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Call for you at eight," he said.

He left her staring, wide-eyed, with a choking lump somewhere above her lungs that was stifling her.

The county highway bisected Weyland Meadows Dairy, but most of the farm's buildings lay to the north of it. A drive left this road at right angles, passed the boarding house on the right, ran between creamery and garage, and split twenty-five yards beyond—one branch slanting left toward the cow barns, one making a ninety-degree curve to the right

around the corncrib, the root cellar, and some old farm sheds which had been converted to garages for the department heads. Down this branch, on the right, was the gigantic gray bulk of the double-winged horse barn; on the left, a still unfinished maternity barn; still farther to the left, the main building of the dairy's chicken-and-egg department. The drive ended in a dirt crossroad on the other side of which stately spruces partially hid an apple orchard that marched down the gentle slope beyond. In the angles formed by the junction of these roads two homes faced the orchard, the one on the left being that of Ben Goetz.

Ben avoided the asphalt this evening and walked on the grass, which was cooler and easier to the feet. He was dead tired; he always was, evenings, for his muscles were long, stringy, and thin, without hardness. If anything could have strengthened them, surely the long hours of standing, walking, lifting cases would have done so. Yet tonight there was more than physical weariness to bother him.

The house, Ben noticed as usual on approaching it, needed paint. It was dingy gray, streaked, and around the eaves the wood showed through, black and water-rotted; underfoot, the surface of the porch was worn in a path to the front door. He wished dully that the dairy took better care of its houses, but knew the wish was futile.

Sonia was in the kitchen, and the smell of supper was warm in the house. "Ben?"

"Yuh," he said wearily, "it's me."

The words lingered, and Ben wondered why. Then he knew: he, a college man supposedly educated, was saying, "Yuh, it's me!" It marked so clearly how far he had come in the twelve years since his graduation! He hated to be reminded of his schooling. The job of milkman, faintly comic as it was, was no work for a college graduate.

Sonia emerged from the kitchen, small, soft, fragile, her fine hair misty about her head. She kissed him. "Bad day, Ben? You look worn out. What's the matter?"

Leaving his cap and route book on the bench in the hall, he headed for the living-room sofa. "Tired."

"You'll feel better with something inside of you. Now don't lie down. You'll only fall asleep. Wait till after supper."

"Just for a sec'," he said. "I won't. I'll get right up."

"Ben, please! You know you will. You always do. Wait—"

But Ben was already on his side, limp as a wilted vine.

The woman glanced toward the kitchen. Ben could be asleep in a minute, and dinner would not be ready for another ten.



"How many points today, Ben? . . . Aw, Ben dear, don't go to sleep. Please!" Then she saw that his eyes were open and he was looking at her. "Ben—what's wrong?"

"They cut the route."

"Oh-h—Ben—dear!"

"They're taking the Zeiglers and the Danavans and the Reisenbergers and the Bantocks and—"

"Ben—your best customers!"

"Uh. . . They're taking a hundred points. It—doesn't seem—"

She stood in the center of the room, a stirring spoon in one hand, an apron half hiding her print house dress. She was a slight, wispy person and looked so fragile that her energy, strength, and warmth came invariably as a surprise to him. He could imagine a breath blowing her away, but knew a hurricane would hardly budge her. He could imagine her breaking at a careless touch—yet knew that physically and mentally she was tougher than he.

Moving slowly, she came to sit beside him. "Ben?"

"Uh?" He sensed something in her tone.

"Ben, I'm sorry, of course, but— You see it had to be, don't you? It's growth. It's like the amoebae we used to watch in the laboratories—remember? They divided. That's elementary growth, and it's the way a dairy has to grow—"

"Aw, hon, I've worked so hard to make the route big so it'd pay, so we'd get enough out of it to be comfortable. . . . And now they've taken the best part of it! left me that Millville territory. You can't sell milk there. You can't collect for it if you do! Don't you see, hon, I can't build it up again—possibly!—in six months, before my guarantee is up. And after that my commissions—"

"We'll get along," Sonia said. "We'll live on less. We'll save."

"How—with installments eating my salary—"

"If necessary, I'll get a job again."

He shook his head. "We've been over that. Supporting you is my job."

"We'll see, Ben." There was firmness in the soft voice.

"Sometimes I think Barchi's right about the farm—"

"No, Ben—please! The farm has to do this. It's the only way it can grow—and it must! Ed Thomas must have dreaded it as much as—"

"You're always on his side—" \*

"No, I'm on ours. We've a chance in a growing business—"

He said bitterly, "We've no chance anywhere. I'll never be anything."

"Oh, Ben, stop it!" His self-pity, as always, was like a lash on raw

flesh. Perhaps, too, his news had cut deeper than she pretended. "If you'd only leave this job! It's burning you out. If you'd take something you're fitted for—"

"Be no better at anything else," he mumbled wearily. "I don't have what it takes."

"You do, Ben! Just trust yourself— Oh, dear, the dinner! Don't go to sleep now, please! I'll be ready in just a minute."

Ben was dully ashamed. He and Sonia had fought this over a hundred times, but there was nothing to be done. As the emotion faded, weariness crept back, and his mind whirled dizzily on the verge of sleep. He let it hover there, sensuously enjoying the approaching oblivion.

"Ben!"

"Uh?"

"I'm putting dinner on the table."

"A' right."

"Ben!"

No answer.

"Ben, sit up! You'll be asleep. The meal's on."

"Lea' me alone."

"Oh, Ben, please! Don't go to sleep. You're so hard to wake up."

"In a minute!" he snarled. "In a minute. Just lea' me alone."

"But you'll go to sleep, Ben! Sit up. Come on now."

But his mouth had sagged open, and his eyes were sealed. Sonia watched hopelessly. Dinner was cooling, but to wake him again would be almost impossible.

## IV

WEDNESDAY was hot. Massed thunderheads, their shapes barely discernible in the haze, their magnificent crests high-lighted miles up by a hidden sun, hung motionless in the sky from midmorning on.

In the creamery, Amos Vliet, in rubber boots and white pants, worked waist-naked behind his bottling machine, moisture sheening his wide shoulders, the tufts of hair beneath his arms clinging damply. His chest and stomach were muscled like those of some ancient statue and his dark, naked flesh looked almost as hard as one. His strength and toughness were apparent; so was his grace, for every movement was as smooth and swiftly easy as a leaping cat's.

Steve Ochs came in, skirting the pasteurizers and the surface coolers, ducking under the piping. He carried a half-empty milk bottle which he thrust at the bottler as he turned off his machine. "Taste that."

Amos glanced at the blue and white metal cap marked with the initials WM (the theory being that "WM" or "Regular" sounded better than "B milk"), sniffed the contents, then tilted the bottle and sampled it.

"Moses!" He made a face and spat vigorously twice, wiping his mouth on his forearm.

Steve rocked on his heels, watching sardonically.

"Disinfectant," Amos said, handing the bottle back.

"Woman on North's route got it and blew her top. That's not good," the plant manager said. "How'd it happen?"

Amos said blandly, "It's that old bottle washer. Bottles come through it wet. Frenchy or me usually catch 'em, but this one—"

"You're nuts! The bottle washer's old and may miss a bottle now and then, but you and Frenchy don't. See?"

"Hard to see how," Amos agreed. "We're so damned careful."

"O.K. . . . Now another thing: where was the cream line on that Guernsey A yesterday?"

"Better ask your brother." Amos leaned over to push a switch, setting his machine to clattering again.

Steve's jaw splayed, and he was scowling as he emerged onto the hot platform. At its far end stood Quinlan's big truck, and Larry Ochs lounged in the open icebox doorway talking to its driver. Nearer, a couple of the route men, home early, were being unloaded by Manny Zapeto. It was Ihloff's day off, and as usual it was taking two men to do his work. It griped Steve to know that Kenny, who was no giant in ability, could handle things alone invariably while Larry could not.

Steve threaded his way toward his brother. "Larry, give Manny a hand with those drivers."

"Yeah. . . . Yeah, I was just goin' to."

"And keep that icebox closed. Damn it to hell, it's a hot day!"

"I jest come out."

Larry was a lank, slow-moving man with round, sloping shoulders; he had no energy, and his deliberately hesitant drawl whined and protested constantly. He chewed snuff, and a perpetual stubble blackened his cheeks. It was hard to think of him as Steve's brother.

Steve drew him aside. "What happened to that last Guernsey A?"

"Got too hot, I guess."

"What good's a high-butterfat milk if it ain't got a cream line you can see a hundred yards off?"

"We-ell—hell! I got too much to do—"

"When milk's in the pasteurizers, you've got one job—watching it!"

"Well, Christ, I did," Larry whined.

With a swift look around, Steve hooked a buttonhole of Larry's coverall and dragged him close. "Look, you blue-balled bastard, you're here because you're my brother, not because I like your looks or you're worth your pay. I take care of my family, damn it!—but not at my own expense. If they should crack down on me—"

He pushed Larry away. Over his shoulder he had caught sight of Ed Thomas coming through the screen below the office stair. He snapped, "Go on—get busy!" and stepped down into the bottle-washing room.

Frenchy Boudreau said, "Hi, Steve. Who ya hidin' from now?"

Steve held the bottle out. "Try this." Frenchy identified the taste at once and shot an instinctive glance at the hulking monster he tended. "How'd it happen, boy? Not machine trouble?"

The other, with one arm actually outflung toward the bottle washer, halted ludicrously.

"Hey?" Steve asked. "How'd it happen? *Not* machine trouble?"

"Uh—no. . . . No, Steve. The machine runs good."

"Does, huh? Then how'd this happen?" Boudreau hesitated, tentatively tried a shrug. "Funny how you guys never know anything. A few days ago, bottles were coming through unrinsed and wet. Are they still?"

Worried eyes searched his mocking face. "Naw, I—I guess not—"

"Guess not?"

Relieved, the other said hastily, "O' course not. Least I ain't seen **none** for a long while."

"No? You been watching, ain't you? Have any got by you?"

"Naw, sir," Frenchy said solemnly. "Ain't been a bottle come outa there in a week wasn't dry as a teetotaler at a church picnic."

"Then how'd disinfectant get in this milk?"

"Damn if I know. But every bottle that's come outa there—"

Steve rocked on his heels, grinning. "O.K. Glad to hear it. But between us, son, if another like this shows up, you'll be out of a job no matter how good that machine's running. . . . Now get back to work."

Frenchy mumbled, "Yes, sir," whitely.

The bottler in the next room had stopped, and Steve could hear Amos

saying: "Yeah, I know, Ed. There's disinfectant in it all right, but it didn't get in at the plant."

"Where else could it get in?" Thomas demanded pettishly. "It had to be in before the bottle was capped, didn't it?"

Amos muttered, "I wonder—did you look at that cap, Ed? Closely?" His voice rose slightly, his words reaching Steve through the open door with sudden clarity: "Neither did I. I didn't think of it. Of course, if the cap is all right it'd mean—as you say—the stuff must have got in at the plant—"

"What are you hinting at?" Thomas said.

"Perhaps I'm crazy. I was just thinking that we're a growing business . . . we stepped on toes . . . other companies . . ."

"Oh! But even so—"

"I heard of spoiling milk by putting stuff in it through the cap with a—whaddayacallit?—one of those things a doctor sticks in you."

Ed Thomas said, "I hadn't thought of that angle—"

In the other room, Steve Ochs was using an ice pick to bore a tiny hole in the metal cap, carefully placed to be inconspicuous and so small that it might have been the prick of a needle. Steve was grinning.

Presently he hopped onto the platform, hurried down it, and was just in time to meet Ed coming up from the bottling room. "Oh, Steve—"

"I got an errand," Steve said. "See you in a minute."

"There's a special ice-cream order that came in as I was leaving the office. Southworth wants two dozen bridal molds this afternoon—"

"We gotta have forty-eight hours' notice on specials."

"I know. But some other company fell down. If we could fill it—"

"Yeah, yeah. We get a new booster—who'll want special orders on two hours' notice every time he orders anything. O.K. We got eighteen in stock and can make the rest. But bawl Southworth out. Tell him the trouble we're going to, and say we won't do it again. He can't promise this kind of service all the time!"

"Right," Thomas said. "We're lucky to have any on hand at all."

"Lucky! Hell, it's my job to keep a jump ahead, ain't it?"

"I appreciate that, Steve. I meant lucky you had time to work ahead. Oh—half a second! Is that the bad bottle?"

"This? Yeah. Leaving it upstairs to be sent to the lab."

"Let me look at the cap a minute."

"The cap? What's wrong with it? Looks all right to me. . . . Here—you can have it. Take it up yourself." He thrust it on Thomas and started through the windscreen.

As he did so, a blue and silver stake-bodied Ford truck poked its nose beyond the corner of the creamery and stopped. It was loaded with forty-quart milk cans stacked three deep under a tarpaulin, and melting ice dripped in a stream on the drive behind it. It was the truck which collected milk from the firm's subsidiary producers.

The driver leaned from the cab. "Hey, Steve! Tell Thomas: Ledmuller wants an advance. Fifty bucks—"

"Tell Ledmuller No!" Thomas said, appearing abruptly. "He hasn't it coming and knows it. He'll get his May check on the 12th."

"He wants it against his June deliveries."

"No," Thomas said, "no—no—no—no!"

The driver shrugged. "Don't bawl me out! I'm only tellin' yuh—"

Steve said: "The boys are looking for that milk, fella. Just tell Ledmuller to go to hell—that's all."

He rounded the corner and went into the ice-cream room to give the order for molds. He was just re-emerging when a coupé turned in from the County Road, honking, and he paused, recognizing Ted Snathe, salesman for Hunziger, Welford & Betts, the extract and flavor concern.

Snathe, a small fat man, said, "Hi, Steve! How's trade?"

Steve's "Hello, Ted" was cool.

The other's oily face grinned. "Hop on. Want to talk to you."

The salesman pulled ahead fifty feet and drew to the side of the road where they could see anyone who approached them. "Been at Eastern Dairies, Steve. I hear things about you. No secret, is it? They don't make it one. At least they talk about you plenty."

"Knowing I'll hear," Steve said. "So I'm flattered. I'm softened up. I'm a sucker for their next offer. That's technique."

"When you goin'?"

"I don't know that I am."

Snathe looked blank. "Why, good Lord, you won't stay with a one-horse outfit when Eastern Dairies wants you to run one of their plants! Why, they're *the* dairy in the metropolitan area. Seaboard and they split the East. Judas! If half what I hear is true, they're making you a damn fine offer. Most plant managers 'd give their pants for one from that bunch. It's a bigger job than you got here, fella!"

"Yeah. More money, authority, prestige. . . . More responsibility too. And more work! I may take it. I said No first off, but they're holding it open till the first of the year."

"But—"

"There are angles," Ochs said flatly.

"Oh. . . . Well, I suppose you know what you're doing." The fat salesman sounded doubtful. Then he added, brightening, "There was something else in the wind too. I couldn't get what. Something to do with Thomas. What are they trying to do? Loot Weyland Meadows?"

"Why not? They're a live outfit. They see a place growing, so they dig around, see who's responsible, and go after him. Serves two ways: builds up their own staff, and keeps their rivals scratching. Now look, Ted: this is a busy morning. If you got business to talk—"

"Oh, sure. Sure. Just wanted to see if you weren't ready to try our flavors yet. Give us a chance to show what we have, Steve."

"We're doing fine with Cleve Products."

"Sure, they got a good line. Only ours is better. Hell, Steve, you know the selling points as well as I. Until you give us a trial, there's not much more I can say. How about it? Just once, absolutely free. Our grape-pineapple, perhaps? I got a can right in back, and Cleve doesn't put it out, so they can't crab."

"Why talk to me, Ted? Go see Thomas."

The other made an impatient gesture. "I have. He says you're satisfied—and shrugs. You gotta put in a word for me before—"

"Can't do your work for you, Ted. I'm no salesman."

Snathe drew a deep breath. "Don't get mad," he said, "but could you be a salesman if you were—put on commission?"

Steve didn't get mad. "What's the proposition?"

The fat man expelled his breath. "Three per cent."

"Go talk to Ed."

"Five."

"I get ten from Cleve. Guess you're not in their league."

Snathe whistled. "No wonder I wasn't getting far! . . . Some guys get sore, though, if you try to talk to 'em. Look, if I hafta beat ten per cent, I can't give you some of the prices I quoted."

"Figure on twelve, and come back tomorrow with a list. If it isn't too far out of line, maybe I can talk to Thomas." Steve took his foot off the running board and started away. "See you then."

There was suppressed eagerness in his step as he crossed to the garage. It was a rectangular building with wide doors at either end and another door in the center of the south side. Three-quarters of it was parking space, but the far end was partitioned off as repair shop; and here he found Red Walsh, the foreman, under the farm pick-up. He kicked his protruding rump. "Hey, stinkfoot! Crawl out."

"Christ!" Red crawled out.

His hair and skin were dingy with ingrained grease and dirt, and offered no apparent reason for the nickname. He was over forty, sturdily built, coarse-featured, and his green eyes were his best point. When morose they darkened his whole countenance; but when they lighted with mischief and anticipation, as they did now, the homely face brightened with them. His thick lips spread over amazingly white teeth, and he thrust out a grease-dirtied paw.

"Hiya, Steve, y' old sonuvabitch, put her there!"

His references to stranger or friend were usually opprobrious, and his favorite adjective, equally applicable to faulty bolts, cloudy days, or local dowagers, was elementally sexual.

Steve dodged the black fingers, laughing and fighting him off. Not unintentionally, the resultant roughhouse carried them beyond sight and hearing of Red's two assistants into the storage section, where Steve let himself be trapped between the parked trucks and surrendered to the Walsh mercy.

"Kick me, would you?" Red threatened Steve's white uniform with his greasy hands. "You whoring bastard—"

"Lay off, lay off. I got good news, boy. Eastern Dairies are still nibbling. They're giving me the old bull."

Excitement leapt in the green eyes, only to fade into anxious gloom. "Yeah, but that's all they'll give you, Steve. You better grab their offer. They ain't goin' higher."

"Maybe not. But what's the hurry?" Steve's dark, square face was half grin, half expectation of a grin. Prodding people with knives fascinated him, and the fact that Red Walsh was his friend made no particular difference. "We got six months. Lots can happen in six months." He added slowly. "Maybe—just maybe—we don't want that job anyway."

Walsh, staring, expressed his surprise and disapproval in four letters. "Maybe you don't, but I damn well do! I'm going too, see?"

"You'll go," Steve said, "if I do. But they're interested in Ed Thomas too, I just heard."

"So what?"

"Think it over. But, go or stay, I'll take care of you, stinkfoot."

"Oh, but Christ! I want to get out of here. Thirteen years in this job." He mentioned the unlikely kind of job it was. "Working my guts out. And what've I got for it?"

"You'll get yours. I don't forget friends."



"But you goddam— Why stay here when you could leave? I don't get it. What's the angle?"

Steve held up his crossed fingers.

"Aw, go to hell," Red said and stalked off in a mock temper.

Wharton Pettitt, with his faculty for placing people, said flatly, "You're the new office assistant."

"Clint Matlock, yes, sir." He was a handsome youngster, clean and eager, with curly hair and blue eyes startling in their intensity.

Pettitt frowned. "Sit down. Thomas will see you shortly."

"Thanks." Matlock sat, glancing as he did so at Bet Banevsky, who smiled back. He was attracted by her plump prettiness.

Pettitt let the silence lengthen to see if Matlock were the kind to talk while others wanted to work; but, once the point seemed proved, he cocked an eye over his glasses. "Understand you're a local man?"

"My people live near Amityville. I'm not with them, though. They've given me about all they can—education, a couple of years at ag school. Now I'm on my own. I don't know where I live yet."

"Who are your people?"

"They were Matlock Brothers' Dairy up to seven years ago. Then they sold to Keystone Milk and Cream. They still produce for Keystone."

The bookkeeper said slowly, "Then you know dairying?"

"We-ell, I've had some experience with it—"

"What, exactly?"

"Oh, I've fed, milked, vetted cows. I've run farm machinery, plowed, sown, harvested, hayed—all the rest of it. Then I've worked summers at Keystone, so I know a little about plant problems. And at ag school I've studied the theory of it. But this'll be my first acquaintance with office work."

His tone had taken on life and enthusiasm, and Whart's eyes were cold. "You know so much about it and still want to make it your life's work? . . . H'mph! Can't imagine anyone's wanting to. Most of us stumble into it—and hate it!"

"Not I." Clint chuckled. "I've always liked farms. As a boy, running machinery, driving horses, filling the haymow—even milking—was more game than chore. Of course—frankly—I don't want to spend my life in the production end—"

"God, no!" Pettitt said.

"I want to get into the business end—where there's a future."

Whart knew suddenly what was disturbing him: this boy had ambi-

tion solidly backed with interest, experience, and energy. The bookkeeper's head went up like an animal's scenting danger. Still, the other was young. His future must lie ten or fifteen years ahead while Pettitt's own, if it existed at all, was far closer.

He said, "If that's so and you've connections at Keystone, why come to us instead for a permanent position—ah?"

"Because I know too much about them. They're standing still—even slipping. I want a company that's alive and growing. Weyland Meadows— Well, I've looked you up. You're small still, but you're developing where it counts: in the metropolitan area, not just in this town. You had the best percentage of growth of any milk company in the East last year. I think you're an outfit I can tie my wagon to with a prayer of its turning out to be a star." Matlock grinned boyishly.

Pettitt snorted. "Who told you all this?"

"The local Chamber of Commerce. I spent a lot of time there. They like your progress and prospects. They seem to think Mr. Thomas is a real coming man in the business world. They say some New York company's already made inquiries about him, and they intimated"—the youngster seemed suddenly hesitant—"that this place was not only a good investment in itself, but not to be ignored as a steppingstone. I hope that's not too frank."

"No," Pettitt said. "Everybody has ambitions."

Nevertheless Clint felt rather uncomfortable. Youth and eagerness had run away with his tongue, and he was embarrassed.

The bookkeeper cleared his throat. "A word of warning may be in order, Mr. Matlock. The picture you have is an outsider's. But as usual there are two sides to the situation: the way things look, and the way they are. What you have said is true. We're growing. We could become important. Yes, and Thomas, I suppose, must be considered—promising. So the chance of using us as a springboard is fair too. However, whether we fulfill our promise lies with factors that the Chamber of Commerce knows nothing about."

"May I ask—"

"I'm telling you! . . . There are internal troubles. We've grown too fast, and developed—corporate indigestion."

Pettitt regarded the puzzled boy calculatingly. "We can use you. We need someone in the office who knows dairying. . . . You see I don't—and Thomas doesn't; and our department heads have become sloppy, inefficient, uncooperative. And touchy. They run their departments like

little kingdoms, and we, up here, keep our hands off. That," Petitt said, "is a hint of what you may expect, a detail among many."

Clint stirred uneasily. "You make me feel—"

"I don't want to be discouraging, but I'm in much the situation you were in regard to Keystone: I know too much. I can't say more, and all I've meant to imply is that things aren't as smooth-sailing as they should be. . . . The dairy still could be all you picture it. Maybe it will be—in spite of Thomas."

Petitt regretted that last phrase instantly. It had been so bold that it might well react, in Matlock's mind, against him.

And indeed, noting it, Matlock had already decided that Petitt was right: there were internal crosscurrents, and they weren't confined to the department heads! He was troubled. If he'd been smart, he thought ruefully, he'd have kept his mouth shut till he knew what he was stepping into. After all, though young and enthusiastic, he wasn't unintelligent. Did he have to be hit with a brick before he saw danger?

Before more could be said, Ed Thomas emerged from his office where he had been closeted with a salesman. He nodded at the boy, whom he had met, and came over as soon as he could to shake hands. "Glad to see you, Clint. Ready for work? Have you met Miss Banevsky?"

"No, I haven't. . . . I'd like to!"

Again Bet smiled at him. Provocatively, he thought.

"She'll teach you the office routine," Thomas said. "We're keeping her through Monday. After that, you're on your own. . . . Take him in hand, Bet. . . . Whart, can you come into the office a minute?"

Clint and the girl were left together.

Bet was pretty in a soft, plump, foreign way. Nearly black hair set off skin of an odd rose-gold, and her inviting feminine ripeness suggested passion and warmth and—later—bulk and sluggishness.

There was a brief, uncertain pause. Then Clint asked, "Well—may I draw up a chair?" He swung one close and caught the scent of powder as he sat down. "Where do we start? . . . You know, I hope I'm not taking your job or anything?"

She said: "I'm only a substitute. Only fill in when the regular stenographer is sick or on vacation or—in between times, like this."

"Didn't you get a chance at the job when there was a vacancy?"

"No." She shrugged it off. "I wouldn't have taken it anyway. The blockhead doesn't like girls, and I don't like him. We're even."

Clint smiled. There was a certain descriptive aptness to the epithet.

"You heard that crack about Ed," she added. "Well, he's always doing that—making nasty cracks. About everybody. He's jealous."

"Of what?"

"Oh, of people getting ahead. He's been here an awful long time himself, not getting far. I don't know how it was, but he thinks he got a raw deal: that he'd be manager now instead of Thomas if he'd got what he deserved. Anyway, he's sore at Ed."

Clint nodded. "That might make sense."

"He's awful hard to work with too, awful particular. He wants you to work hard and fast, and he wants to shove all his own work onto you; and still he don't want you too smart, for fear you'll steal his job."

"Sounds like a dilemma"—wryly. "Thanks for the tip."

"Gee, don't take me too serious," Bet said. "Maybe I'm crazy!"

"Sure. I understand. . . . I wonder—"

He had it in mind to ask for a date. He was physically attracted but, if that had been all, might have contented himself with a casual office flirtation. A cautious, ambitious young man who knew the wrong girl when he saw her, he had no intention of becoming involved at this stage of his career. However, what she'd said about Pettitt made her interesting as a source of information too, and Clint, after his talk with the man, felt in need of guidance.

He was on the point of suggesting a movie when the outer door opened and Roane came in. He turned level, disconcertingly hostile eyes full on Clint, who bore them for an astonished, awkward interval before looking to the girl for help. What he saw on Bet's face startled him.

The driver growled, "Eight o'clock. Be ready." And she whispered, "Yes, Hal," sounding breathless and faint. Then Roane marched out.

That was all. Matlock wanted to whistle, but didn't.

Nor, after that, did he ask Bet Banevsky for a date.

Before the afternoon was over, Clint had acquired a pretty good idea of the farm's simple bookkeeping set-up. Bet's factual explanations told him what he was to do rather than why he was to do it; but he was capable of filling the gaps and was frequently well ahead of his instructor.

At four-fifty, she began putting things away, preparatory to going home, and Pettitt said coldly: "Don't let her teach you bad habits, Matlock. This office doesn't close till five."

Bet cried: "But I worked till six Monday on those dealers' bills and till five-thirty last night on the monthly accounts you wanted. Gee, I thought it'd be all right if I left on time tonight!"

"You wouldn't have worked late either night if you'd tended to business during working hours. You dawdled—and you paid for it."

Clint said hastily, "Mr. Pettitt, I wanted to ask if there wasn't some place on the dairy where I might find room and board?"

"We're informal here," the bookkeeper said. "Call me Whart or Wharton. And let me give you a little advice: Don't live here on the place. Take an apartment on this side of the city."

"We-ell, I'd hoped there was an employees' boarding house, or that some of the householders here would take me in—"

"The boarding house is full. You might find a room with a private family—but don't. You wouldn't like it. They aren't our kind. Even the department heads are mere laborers—"

Clint kept his mouth shut, but in the momentary gap Bet's half-muttered remark was quite audible. "Ed Thomas lives at my cousin's and stands it all right."

"What's got into you?" Pettitt demanded. "You've never acted like this. One of your difficult days, I suppose. Women!"

"You wouldn't understand," Bet said sullenly. With the term of her job set, she didn't care what she said.

"Excuse me," Clint put in. "I'd hate to have you think I was ignoring your first advice, but my supply of cash is low and I want some temporary shelter that'll be cheap. I can't afford even an inexpensive apartment now. Besides, I haven't a car and it's a long walk out here, as I discovered this afternoon. You've made it quite clear I'd be a fool to live here long, but I may have to temporarily. Could you suggest where I might try?"

Whart's look was contemptuous, but he rose and stepped to the window behind his desk. "Come here. . . . Over there to the right is Swan Ellis's place. He has a sizable family and—as Miss Banevsky says—Ed Thomas lives with them, so you probably couldn't get in. . . . On the left, across the drive, is the boarding house, and that's full too. Beyond it is Charlie Dann's. He's the barn manager, and if you don't mind smells you could try there. He and his wife are alone. . . . Next beyond is Red Walsh's. You couldn't stand his verbal filth long, I'm sure. . . . Then, at the corner, is the Larry Ochses' where you'd probably get snuff in your food. . . . Next to them, facing on the dirt side road—Come to the other window: you can see better. That's Steve Och's. He has three or four children, so I doubt if there'd be room for you. . . . Next to him comes Kenny Ihloff whose wife is expecting, and next to him, the Heims'. Adrian's the carpenter, and they've taken in boarders before. . . . Then,

across the drive, is the Goetz place. You can't see it. Ben's a driver and educated—"

Clint said: "You needn't go any farther. I ought to be able to find someone to take me in among those you've mentioned."

"It's your funeral," Petitt said.

It was five o'clock. Bet had picked up her handbag and was starting out.

Clint asked, "May I walk downstairs with you?"

She gave him the slow, rich, heavy-lidded smile which was so natural to her but which he now knew, meant little. "If you like."

Outside, he asked, "Which family would you suggest?"

"Oh, the Goetzes! They're nicest. Of course Ben's away most of the night, but that wouldn't matter, I don't think. Sonia's good."

Clint raised his brows. "And your second choice?"

"Oh—I do' know. The Ochses, maybe—if you could get in. Of course Ida Heim has a reputation as a good cook, and she's taken boarders before, only—they haven't stayed. She's—" Bet groped, shrugged.

Clint thought the Goetzes sounded best, but the situation there seemed awkward. If the Heims had boarded men before, no doubt that was the practical answer; it need be but temporary. He walked up the drive, turned right, and headed toward the spruce-lined orchard.

Opposite the horse barn he became aware of a woman talking in bland, fat tones that carried curiously in the hot, muggy quiet of the afternoon: "I buy the farm's milk, sure. Where else could I get it for eight cents? I don't say it's good milk; it's thin, specially that Vitamin D. Still, I can put up with things when a price is right. I'm not a hard woman to satisfy—"

Another voice said, "The farm never gives us its rich milk, naturally. The Guernsey." The voices seemed to emerge from the open door of the Heim kitchen, which he could now see, and Clint thought, Good Lord! The last voice added, "I should think Steve'd do something about that."

"Steve's so busy," the oily voice said. "Everything's on his shoulders. If it weren't for Steve, I don't know what would happen to this place, honestly! I always say, if he quit, not a quart of milk 'd move—not a quart."

"Excuse me," Clint said. "Is Mrs. Heim here?"

In the Heim kitchen, a fat woman—she who had been talking—sat on a chair made invisible by her bulk. She overflowed it. She hung down from it on all sides like a feather ticking carelessly dropped. She had a

smooth, moon face framed in straight black hair pulled tightly down from a center part, and in her small mouth were rows of teeth too perfect to be anything but false.

There was another woman in the kitchen, but Clint hardly noticed her till she stepped forward and asked, "What do you want?"

He said, relieved: "I'm the new man in the office, Mrs. Heim. I start work tomorrow, and I'm looking for room and board. I understand you sometimes take boarders?"

"Asked everywhere else and couldn't get in, eh?"

He blinked. "No-o. This was the first place I tried."

"Why?"

He was nonplused. "Why not?"

She was a small, thin woman and must have been startlingly blonde once, and no doubt vividly pretty; but her blondeness had faded to drab, and her features, developing character late in life, had hardened and sharpened.

"I've taken boarders before," she said, "but they haven't stayed. They didn't understand that I make no concessions and have certain rules which must be obeyed."

"That would seem only fair."

"Why do you want to board here? To be near my daughters?"

Clint gulped. "I didn't even know you had any!"

"Then why?"

Not knowing and not caring, he said: "Oh, I heard about your cooking. Someone said it was the best on the farm."

"The one good thing they could say about me, I guess. I set a good plain table, that's all. Nothing fancy." But she seemed mollified.

"The recommendation brought me running," he said. "However, I don't want to inconvenience you—"

"If you do, you'll get out. You want two meals or three?"

"All three."

"Two dollars a day."

"Too much. I can't afford more than a dollar and a half."

"You can't expect to be well fed at that price."

Already regretting coming here, Clint said: "That's all I can afford. If you can't do it, I'll look elsewhere."

"I'll try," she said, "for a while; but you'll have to pay in advance and abide by all the rules." She opened the screen, and Clint found himself entering the kitchen under compulsion of her abrupt gesture. "I'll show you the room." He felt confusedly that his house hunt had turned into

a kidnaping. "You haven't told me your name, but this is Allie Ochs, Steve's wife. Steve's the plant manager."

"Matlock," Clint said. "How do you do, Mrs. Ochs."

The mountain of flesh tittered. "Ida can't resist good looks."

Mrs. Heim, who had motioned him through the opposite door and toward the stairs, slammed the door behind them.

"Those rules you mentioned—" Clint suggested.

Ida said flatly, "First of all, I won't have dirt tracked in! You'll use the back door. The other boys worked in the barns, so they changed their shoes; but in your case wiping and brushing them will do."

"I guess that's reasonable. Walking around a farm, you do get—"

"Reasonable or not, the whole family has to do it! Nor will I have you late for meals. I serve at seven-thirty, twelve-fifteen, and six-thirty. If you're late, you eat in the kitchen. And your rent doesn't entitle you to icebox privileges. Miss a meal and you pay for it anyway unless you're gone several days at a time. . . . Here's your room."

The floor needed varnishing, the woodwork refinishing, and the ceiling was cracked; but the place was neat and scrupulously clean. Indeed, it was a cheerful room, and Clint, who had been expecting the worst, was impressed.

"It would do nicely," he said, "but—the rest of your rules?"

"Only what you'd expect in your own home. Keep your feet off the furniture—and the bedspread: that's a handmade one. Keep this room picked up and neat. And don't clutter the rest of the house either."

"Naturally. If that's all—"

"It's not. Most important of all, there are my daughters. While you're here, you'll have dates with neither. You'll permit neither in your room nor go to theirs. *On any excuse whatsoever!* There'll be no physical contact, no rough-housing, no gesture of courtesy, even, which might involve touching them. Do you understand?"

Clint mumbled, "I assure you, Mrs. Heim—"

"One false move, and out you go! Without notice. You're a good-looking man, and my girls are young and impressionable. I want no misunderstanding! . . . Now, do you still want to board here?"

"Well—"

"You may move in, in the morning. I'll expect you for breakfast and don't forget your rent's in advance."

They returned to the kitchen.

Allie Ochs said: "Ida, you're ruder every day. But I'll be far gone—"



before I have to slam doors for an answer. Of course there was no other. Mr. Matlock *is* handsome, isn't he? And I always said Adrian can't be much satisfaction to you—"

Ida said, "Goodbye, Mr. Matlock."

Clint nodded. "I'll see you in the morning, Mrs. Heim." And to Allie: "Very pleased to have met you."

The fat voice followed him across the lawn. "He is handsome, you know. He's almost too— You know what I mean. . . . Is he out of hearing?"

"Not of your voice," Ida snapped.

"Of course I was joking about you," Mrs. Ochs said, "but there's Mary and Eunice. Do you really think it's wise? I mean, bringing him into the house? What do you know about him? And with two young girls—"

"I need the money."

"But you're a woman of the world, dear. And you know this younger generation. It's so free. It doesn't look at things as we did. It's not as— nice. I know with Duke just sixteen I have to be so terribly careful about housemaids. I take only the homeliest, and even so—"

"I pride myself," said Ida Heim, "that my children were brought up to think morally. The young man won't bother them. I'll see to that!"

Clint drew out of hearing. He felt hot, uncomfortable and a little dirty. He was wishing he had tried any place but the Heims'.

The thunderstorm which the heat portended failed to arrive. Instead, at sunset, a cool wind sprang up, and Charlie Dann, walking to the barns to check on the midnight milking found it shivery and chill beneath bright stars. He entered the main barn by way of the milkhouse.

Boo Fusek was reading the weight of a pail of milk on the spring-balance scale. "H'lo, boss! Cold night, huh?"

Saying hello bored Charlie. He growled, "How's the old lady?"

"No sign a action, boss."

"She's overdue, and I thought she was restless today."

"Dick says she ain't calvin'. Not tonight. He us'ally knows."

"Um." Charlie was uneasy not because the animal was overdue but because she was Weyland Ormsby Lucy Pride, a record producer and one of the few Ormsby daughters left in the herd. She'd had a hard time calving once before. He wondered if he should call the vet, or—

"Where's Donny?" If there was a nasty job to be done, he usually gave it to Donny Ochs.

"Over to the other barn."

Charlie took his disappointment sourly. He was a hungry-looking man with gray hair rising in a stiff pompadour above a pointed fox face. His gray eyes burned cheerlessly in hollow sockets and his mouth was twisted with discontent.

Boo emptied his pail of milk into the tank, and they watched it run thinly over the corrugated surfaces of the cooler and drain from the spout, through the cotton filter disc, into the forty-quart can.

Boo picked up his pail. "Y'all comin'?"

They went into the barn, which was full of the noise of cows and of milking. Stanchions clattered, the vacuum line hissed and gulped, the pitchfork of the man feeding chattered on the cement.

Dick Flemhos, a pail in either hand, met them at the milkhouse door, nodded silently, and tried to edge by; but Charlie stopped him to ask about the prospective mother.

"She's quiet. She's all right," Dick said sullenly.

"I've a hunch something's wrong. I think we should call the vet."

"Na-a-ah!"

"Maybe somebody should sit up with her, at least?"

Dick's shoulders hunched, and his hands tightened around the handles of the pails. "Not me! I don't sit up with no cows tonight!"

"Nobody asked you to—yet!"

"'Yet' is right! You're going to. You always pick on me. Every nasty job there is, I get it!" He set the pails on the floor and took a threatening step forward. "You had it in for me since I came here."

Boo cried: "Hey, Dick, take it easy! You're crazy. The rest of us get nasty jobs too. Come on, take your milk in and cool it—"

"I get sick of it," Dick yelled. His fury seemed unwarranted. "I had enough! I'm sitting up with no cows that don't need it."

Charlie had had no intention of giving him the job, but he said now, "You are—or you don't work here any more."

Boo said: "Aw, Charlie, have a heart. He don't mean it!"

"He oughtn't to say it then. He's talked himself right into a job. Or out of one!"

Boo turned to Dick. "Jeez, guy, be sensible. Sit up with her, huh?"

"I won't," Dick said. "He's got no right. It's my day off."

"Hey, that's right, Charlie! He's working for Mickey Pratt, see? He didn't bargain for overtime. It ain't fair!"

"I'll look at the cow. If she needs watching, he'll watch her."

"I won't! You're picking on me."

"Then you're fired, Dick. Beat it."

"Aw, Dick," Boo pleaded, "be sensible! Do what he wants. You don't wanta quit. Where'd you go? How'd you live?"

"I don't care. We'd find another job where we weren't picked on."

"We? Aw naw! I ain't leavin' here. No, sir. Come on, now."

Flemhos looked as though he'd been struck. His swarthy, stubble-shadowed face worked oddly. Then: "All right! . . . All right, I'll do it 'cause Boo says so, but I'm tard of being stepped on. I'll get even!"

Charlie said: "You're all talk, Flemhos. Get on with the milking."

"Some day I won't be." Dick went into the milkhouse, muttering.

Charlie said, "I don't know how you pal around him. Always lookin' fer trouble. The two of you still living together? . . . Where?"

"The other side of the farm. He's all right. We get on good."

Charlie crossed the barn and went down the far alleyway to the feed room. Beyond, in the ell, were calf pens and stalls for expectant mothers. He found Weyland Ormsby Lucy Pride munching peacefully, just as the boys had said. Her head turned slowly to look at him, but she didn't miss a stroke and her liquid brown eyes were bored. Charlie's misgivings faded, but he thought it would do Dick good to sit up with her anyway.

He left the ell by the upper end and crossed the yard to the entrance of the upper barn, where the Guernsey herd was kept—and there was Mickey Pratt.

"Am I being kidded?" Charlie demanded. "Somebody said he was working for you."

"Hi, Charlie. Somebody is. In a way. It's a long story." The boy eased the cups onto the teats of the cow he had been cleaning, and felt the vacuum take hold.

Charlie squatted beside him, his habitually sour expression gone, for Mick was a cut above the other boys in some respects and he could be not only informal with him, but at ease. "What've I gotta do, bribe you? . . . O.K. Come over Sunday, and we'll have some beer."

"A' right. But no cake. Roxy's a good egg, and her cake's good; but she's got no sense about serving it with beer. . . . Y' see, it was this way: I wanted to be off Friday—tomorrow. That's Pop's day off, so I tried to trade with him."

"No soap?"

"No soap. He didn't want to take Wednesday, see? So I said how about Thursday, and that was all right, so I went to see Dick, who's off Thursday. Well, Dick traded with me, and I traded with Pop. Dick took Wednesday off. Pop's off tonight, and I'm off tomorrow."

Charlie chuckled. Laughter was rare with him, but the barn boys' finagling, when it didn't annoy him to the point of murder, could amuse him. At least, Mickey Pratt's could; they got on. He asked, "What's up Friday you want to be off for?"

Mick said, "Hey, look! Gimme a hand with the stripping, huh?"

"You go to hell."

"Aw, fella! You know how I hate to work. And I'm feelin' lazy."

"Quit stalling. Why do you want Friday off?"

"I ain't stalling." Nevertheless Mick hesitated. "We're celebrating Ihloff's kid, see, and I don't much want to leave at midnight to come over here. I want to sleep in the morning too."

Charlie stood up slowly, and the kidding faded from his face. "That's at Steve Ochs's."

"Uh-huh."

"Nobody who goes to a party at Steve's needs to expect beer from me." Charlie was in dead earnest. "You and I've been friends, Mick, and there ain't so many I'd want to be friends with here; but if you're taking up with that—"

"Oh, hell, I'm not taking up with him! I'm just going to his party, that's all. Because I like Ihloff. Look, why's he such poison to you? Ever since Donny Ochs started work here, you been down on 'em both. Why? Donny's a swell guy—"

Charlie said stiffly, "I don't like them. . . . You still going?"

Pratt stared down at the cement. The cow moved restlessly. He said, "Well, hell, Charlie—"

Dann turned and walked away. Mick swore at himself and got back to work, feeling unreasonably lousy about it all.

## V

FREDA ELLIS had been getting ready for the party since Monday. She had saved Tuesday's and Wednesday's lunch money, and that, with a little extra she had wheedled from her father, had financed a visit to Mr. Giuseppe, the barber. Mr. Giuseppe had taken the fluffiness out of her hair, reset the long waves, and fixed them in place with something called veneer so they would stay. That had been yesterday. The very first thing this afternoon, she had put her hair in rags to make sure

there would be a curl at the ends. It was still tied up, as she had known it would be, and she had given the boys the last of her money for a movie because she didn't want them to see her like this and start asking questions.

She wished now, too late, that she had dared a real beauty parlor and a new hair-do, after all. Wearing it on her shoulders seemed so little-girlish. Besides, it was hot. She knew she couldn't have changed it, though. Swan would have noticed anything radical, and she dreaded his questions.

She hadn't yet told him of her invitation.

She had been busy, too, with the matter of a dress.

Surprising how long it had taken to decide about that, considering how slight was her choice. She had dreamt of a new one, but there had been no real question of that. She would have had to ask Swan, and he had just finished buying her a graduation outfit.

If only that had been suitable!

It wasn't. It was hardly "special," even, except that she would wear it first when she made her speech. It was practical and everyday.

And she had thought wistfully of her long party dresses. They were old and too sweet, and she didn't like them much; but they might have done, with alterations. No use, though. The farm women didn't wear long dresses to these parties. Freda wanted to be noticed, but not for wearing the wrong things.

This left her small choice. There was her favorite light print with the large flowers, short-sleeved, trimmed up with frilly collar and cuffs; but she had used it for best so long! There was another she liked, a suit, newer, smarter, but a winter outfit. And there was the figured silk that she had worn to church so much; but it wasn't real silk and had gone sleazy in the back. Her only other choice was a blue polka-dot which had never suited her.

The prospect of wearing any of them had made her miserable. Not one—not even the print—seemed pretty or attractive. They had been made for the child she had been two years ago and just wouldn't do for a grown-up party.

Reluctantly, for lack of anything else, she had picked the print. It was so old that the skirt was noticeably long, and she had spent last evening shortening it. While she worked, she had had an inspiration: Why not take the cuffs off those short sleeves and leave them plain, get rid of that wide, fancy collar by cutting the bodice into a lapelled-suit style? Then, if she wore her imitation pearls with it, she would practically have a new

dress, an older, more sophisticated dress without that childish sweetness she was beginning to hate.

She had hesitated, wondering if she had the imagination and the talent to make the alterations, but then had plunged ahead. Things had not gone too well, and she had had to leave it overnight and finish it this afternoon in an awful hurry. Finally she had tried it on in fear and trembling, and it had looked so strange, so disappointing! But she had found a bright sash to substitute for its plain belt and after that had decided it would do. In fact, getting used to it, she had decided it was quite smart.

Checking the seams and pressing it had taken the rest of the afternoon, but there had been one more task which had to be done though supper was crying to be started. It had to be done in the secrecy of her bedroom, carefully, painstakingly, and it was something that would make this party a milestone forever: she was going to put on nail polish.

She had stopped at the five-and-ten this noon—after her morning exam—and bought a bottle for the first time. Rose.

She felt very queer, putting it on. It was like the day she had first tried lipstick. Lipstick was an accepted fact now, and she supposed she would get used to nail polish too, but it was surprising how the color, which in the bottle had seemed a moderate dull pink, turned out to be a vivid, startling crimson on her fingertips. It made her feel uncomfortably conspicuous, and she wondered how she could possibly keep the family from noticing through supper.

She wasn't so expert at using it, either. Still, it wasn't bad; it looked only a little uneven.

There was nothing to do while she waited for the nails to dry. She was as ready as she could get, barring what must be done after dinner. On the whole, she was satisfied. The dress would be beautiful—she was becoming more and more enthusiastic about it—and Mr. Giuseppe had done a fine job on her hair. Yes, and the pimples she'd had Monday were gone—almost. They wouldn't show when she put powder on.

Oh, it would be a glorious evening—if daddy let her go.

And of course he would! He was a swell person; he would understand.

He might even let her take the car, so that she could drive up in style. For an instant, wistfully, she imagined a boy taking her in on his arm, something that had never happened to her at any party. In some way not quite clear, she envied girls who were escorted; it must give them a feeling of strength, support. You wouldn't feel so nervous and alone.

Only she mustn't feel like that. She must feel that this, her first grown-

up affair, would be a personal triumph. People were going to notice and admire her. She would be belle of the ball.

Of course "ball" wasn't the word for a farm party. She knew that, yet illusion lingered about the mundane facts. She knew they weren't even "parties" in a strict sense. People, that is, didn't dress up much to come to them. Boys came in their work clothes, even department heads didn't always change. Call it an informal get-together. The men played poker. The women talked. Oh, but there would be music and dancing—and she loved to dance. There would be fun, noise, conviviality. There might be something to drink—there sometimes was though farm budgets rarely ran to liquor—and she wondered delightfully if she dared try any. Swan loved his apple, but had never let her sample it. Perhaps tonight she could have a sip—to see what it was like.

And—who knew?—perhaps, though she went unescorted, she might find someone to take her home. But even if not, no matter how the party turned out, it would be marvelous! How could her first be anything else?

Her nails were dry. She made sure, gingerly, and then, with fingers stiff and awkward because she was conscious of them, took the rags from her hair and combed it out. When it was done, she admired the results in wondering excitement. Smooth, glossy waves fell to her shoulders and broke on them in a smother of loose, frothy curls. It had never looked so nice.

Oh, it would be a *wonderful* evening!

She went downstairs. The house was silent, yet to her ears it was full of sound: talk, laughter, movement. The party was here instead of at the Ochses', and she was making a dramatic entrance down a curving stair into a ballroom. She paused with her hand poised delicately on the rail, and a hush crept over the crowd. They were looking at her, admiring her. And then, out of the mass of upturned faces, came a young man with a scarlet ribbon across the black and white of his dress clothes. Really someone, she thought as he came toward her. He took her hand and bowed over it, and she felt his mustache tickle its back. He murmured, "The Ambassador from Afghanistan, Princess," and it thrilled her to her toes. She knew she would like him very much indeed . . .

Swan's body was slight as an iron picket and as hard. Sun and wind had turned his skin a Red Indian bronze, and the color was accentuated by broad high cheekbones, long lips, and the impassiveness of his bearing. It might have been an actual blood strain (his family had been in the Middle West in pioneer days), but he was principally Swedish.

He came to the kitchen to wash at the sink before dinner, and Freda told herself she must ask him now. Since Monday she had put this moment off repeatedly, but now she must face it. There was no reason why he shouldn't let her go to the Ochses', and yet with complete conviction she knew he would say she was too young. She knew it with such certainty that words with which to ask, to beg, would not come.

She stood with her hands curled into fists so that he could not notice her nails, and she thought wildly of not telling him at all but just creeping down the back stairs when she was ready, and going.

He was so hard to talk to, she thought, watching him turn off the water and reach for a towel. He was so remote. Bold in its planes but inexpressive as stone, his face revealed nothing, not even weariness, though he had been twelve hours in the fields working side by side with his men. Swan was tough, though at forty-six he was the oldest of the department heads and had been at Weyland Meadows since Melius had picked his original staff fifteen years before.

Freda was immensely proud of him. She knew the independence with which he ran his department, hiring his own men, buying his own supplies, selling his own crop and consulting no one about it. Thomas—and Wycoff earlier—had had an absolute confidence in him which was shared by the men working under him, who knew how well he did his job, and by the businessmen with whom he dealt. In Thomas's absence it was he—not Petitt or any other department head—who had authority to sign farm checks and deal with farm crises.

But in spite of her pride Freda never felt close to him. Swan was a hard man to know, for he was so naturally reserved that it was a barrier between his own mind and the minds of others, even of his own children. Four years ago, when Freda was twelve and Mrs. Ellis had been killed, the barrier might have been broken between these two with but the slightest hint of willingness on the part of either, but the chance had slipped by. Now Freda had no way of knowing if there was warmth, sympathy, or depth beneath his unyielding appearance; and, feeling instinctively that men of integrity are not always men of understanding, she was afraid.

She hesitated, and the moment passed. Swan went into the other room, and she could hear him talking to Ed Thomas.

The boys came home late, full of the movie they had seen. They had to tell its whole story at the dinner table, excitedly and with some disagreement as to detail, and they paid Freda no attention at all. She



should have been thankful, but instead she was sneakingly disappointed. Only Ed Thomas seemed to have noticed the slightest thing unusual in her appearance.

She couldn't eat, and no one even noticed that.

The youngsters kept jabbering, their voices so shrill and insistent that she wanted to howl. She kept telling them to hurry with their food, but it seemed as though dinner would never end. When it finally did, she let them clear the table, but shooed them out of the kitchen afterward, saying she wouldn't do the dishes, she guessed. She scraped and stacked them, though, once the boys were outside playing, and straightened the kitchen and dining room. Only when the house was neat did she clatter up the back stairs to dress.

She was already late; but the idea of arriving effectively after everyone else rather appealed to her, and she didn't hurry with her bath or with dressing. She chose her lingerie with care, making sure there were no darns, and she discarded two shades of stockings that did not appeal. The remodeled dress, when she got it on, justified all her efforts; now that her hair was combed and her make-up on, her last doubt of it vanished; it was all she could have wished, and the imitation pearls added just the right touch. She put on two charm bracelets, the only thing approaching dress jewelry that she had, and was quite happy about herself. She stood at the mirror in a radiant daze. She had worried and worried about her appearance; yet here she was, the prettiest she had ever been. Her heart pounded with excitement.

And then, turning to get her handbag from the dresser drawer, she felt suddenly hollow, for there was nothing more to do. Now, at last, she must face Swan and win his permission. The moment could be put off no longer. Not if she were to go.

If?

Could a person plan, dream, scheme all week and then—just—not go? Could she take off the party clothes she had worked and fretted over and crawl miserably into bed without even asking?

It was more than possible; it was what, for a few moments, she was actually going to do! For she had been kidding herself all week, insisting there was no reason for Swan to object. There wasn't, but he was going to—and she had known it!

She was so sure of it now that she was afraid to ask.

She sank down at the dressing table, holding back the tears only because one slim hope refused to be crushed and she dared not cry while the slightest chance still remained. But she had never felt so hopeless.

The strange lax state of mind lasted several full minutes before common sense took possession of her. She could undress and go to bed, or she could go downstairs and face it; but one or the other she must do. Sitting here, suffering and uncertain, was silly.

She decided she could rise at least, and she did so, in the face of physical reluctance. Then she decided she could walk, and though it was like moving through shoulder-deep water, she forced herself to the door and through it, along the upper hall to the stairs, and down.

In the living-room doorway she stood waiting to be noticed, feeling her heart labor. She had let her chance of speaking to Swan alone pass back there in the kitchen; now Ed Thomas was present, and she could only hope he would have a softening effect on Swan's refusal.

It was he who looked up first, smiling. Swan was reading, but presently he too glanced up. "Come in and sit down," he said impatiently, as though her standing there distracted him.

Here she had never looked nicer—and he had noticed nothing! It hurt, even through the hollow feeling, and Freda's lips quivered.

Thomas was more observant. "Going out, Freda?"

She gulped, "Yes. I mean, is it—all right if I do, dad?"

Swan really looked at her then. "Where to?"

"The Ochses'."

"Duke having a party?"

"No, it's a party for Kenny Ihloff—"

"Oh! Well, I doubt if you'd want to go to that," he said.

The intensity of her disappointment told how much, in spite of everything, she had still hoped. She wanted to bawl. Hanging onto herself tightly, she cried, "But I was invited, daddy! Why can't I go?"

"You're pretty young for farm parties, Freda."

"I'm sixteen! Steve didn't think I was too young; he invited me."

"You don't want to go. You wouldn't be interested—"

"Oh, but I would! Daddy, you don't know!"

"I don't think you'd better argue."

"But, daddy—"

"Go back upstairs and change," Swan said. There was granite in it.

Tears burned behind her eyelids and could be no longer repressed. She turned and ran, and when she was in her room, flung herself face downward across the bed, sobbing as heartbrokenly as only the young can. They were honest tears, for she was too inexperienced to think of the effect they might have.

Heartache swept her fiercely till her pillow was wet. She kept whis-

pering into it, "I wanted to go! . . . I wanted to go so much!" And the grip of the passion was so strong it shook her physically. It had a pulse of anger in it too, a hate of her father; but its full fury had begun to ebb before she saw that, and it came as a shock, frightening her. She hadn't meant it, of course! She lay quivering, afraid of the depths that had been touched—and in that moment heard a step.

She lifted her head swiftly, turned, and saw Swan.

The next instant her face was buried again, not quite so honestly this time, for the emotion which had stabbed and flooded her was a wild, surging hope.

He sat on the edge of the bed, and she cried, "Don't touch me!"

"I—heard you crying, Freda." He spoke awkwardly, as though his tongue were rusty. He was more used to giving orders than to explaining himself.

She sobbed again, shudderingly but without intention or calculation. New hope was struggling in her heart, but her body still fought the extravagances of the paroxysm.

"I didn't see—how much it meant to you," Swan said. "I didn't want to make you cry. I don't know why you should."

"Because I want to go! I want to so bad it hurts!"

"Why? They're not—women's parties. You wouldn't like them. They're dull. The men play poker while the girls—gossip. Understand, there's nothing—nothing wrong about them, nothing—vicious—"

"Then why can't I go and decide for myself?"

Listening to her own heart and her own breathing, Freda knew suddenly that Swan found this hard to answer. Excitement leapt in her, and she propped herself on one elbow to pursue the advantage. Swan saw her reddened eyes and the tear furrows on her cheeks and turned his head.

"Daddy, please! Maybe I'm not grown-up, but I'm no baby, either. You trust me with the house. I buy all our food and things. If I'm old enough for that, can't I be trusted to—to— If I didn't like it, I'd come home."

Swan said, "I haven't said what I meant."

"But what are you afraid of? If it's the drinking, I promise—"

His gesture was impatient. "You're old enough to try liquor if you want. I'd trust you with that. I'd be more afraid of their filth, almost; but you've already heard your share, I expect. It isn't that." There was silence while he groped. He found intangibles difficult. He said: "It's the people. I don't want you too close to them. The barn boys,

the plant hands— They've nothing to interest you or— Oh, hell!"

"But you go with them. You have them here at the house—"

"It's part of my job. I'm a man and can take what they are and ignore it. But I hate to have you meeting and being—dirtied by people like that. You've better stuff in you. I don't want you—dirtied." He found no other word.

Freda was subtly disturbed, and her yearning to go was dampened though not extinguished. "I should decide for myself!" she insisted. "Besides, I was invited and said I'd come. I can't go back on that."

"You'd no right to say so before asking permission."

"But I didn't know you'd object! I thought—"

"No, Freda. Next summer, or the summer after, perhaps—"

A second disappointment on the heels of revived hope brought tears flooding back. "But I want to go now! I want to go so much! I've counted on it all week. I've counted the minutes—"

"Don't cry," he said. "I'm trying not to be harsh—"

"But I've gone to so much pains. I've done everything. I made over this dress. I worked all yesterday evening and all this afternoon, and I wasn't sure—and then it was wonderful! And I didn't eat lunch Tuesday or Wednesday so I could have my hair fixed, and Mr. Giuseppe did a swell job, and now it's all wasted—"

"Oh, quit it!" Swan said miserably.

"Aw, daddy, please! Please! You don't know what it means. Daddy!" Swan got to his feet.

"And you said I couldn't right in front of Mr. Thomas too—"

"I'm sorry about that."

"And I'm so ashamed— Aw, dad, please let me go. Please!"

"Oh, all right. Only quit crying! If it means so much, you can go this once. But don't count on pulling this stunt often, young lady." He paused at the door. "You're getting around me, and don't think I don't know it. Against my better judgment, I'll let you go—because I believe you're honestly heartbroken. But do one thing: try not to be fooled—by your imagination—or because you're sore at me. Look at the people—and the party—as they are. Will you do that?"

Freda wasn't sure what he meant, but nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes!"

She jumped up and hurried to the mirror. She looked awful. Her eyes and face were red and swollen, her new dress was practically ruined. Yes, and already it was dreadfully late, but . . .

But at least she was going!

Pressing the dress did not take long; but getting her face back to some semblance of prettiness was a miserable task, and she was still unhappily conscious of it when she stood on the Ochses' porch listening to the radio music, the laughter, and the deep undercurrent of the men's voices. The party sounded gay, and some of her old excitement reawoke in spite of the diffidence that was making her hesitate. She could have made the entrance of a queen if only she hadn't looked so awful.

No one ever knocked, so presently she opened the screen and slipped in. Straight ahead, stairs led to the second floor, but her eyes went instinctively to the brightly lighted room on the left where the men were playing poker around the big dining-room table. The air was heavy, blue with smoke, foul with the smell of liquor. Some of the glasses were already empty, and the men were in high spirits.

She saw Duke, Steve's oldest boy who was her own age and a good clean-looking kid; and Mickey Pratt from the barn, who was nice-looking too, but older; and there was Kenny Ihloff himself, tight and happy. Next to him was Red Walsh, and beyond him Freda was surprised to see a coldly handsome young man whom she did not know but whose chill expressionlessness fitted admirably at a poker table; he seemed to be doing well. Another in the game was Amos Vliet. Amos was winning too, and Steve Ochs stood behind him kibitzing. Freda heard other voices in the kitchen, among them Larry's slow drawl.

Duke saw her first and waved.

Steve, catching the movement, looked up. "Well, I'll be damned! Look who's here! Come on in, Freda. How's a girl?" He came to her, grinning, slightly flushed, his square white teeth showing brilliantly in his dark face. "Doggone!" he said. "If you aren't swelled up! Look like a Grade A quart in a case of B!"

Freda warmed, and her confidence came back.

But Steve didn't stop. "Where you bound for, huh? Big date?" He did stop then, belatedly. "What've I said?" And then: "Oh, Jesus! I forgot. I asked you here!" It struck him funny, and he whooped, but an instant later sobered again. "I'm sorry, Freda. Honest! I never know who I invite. Everybody's welcome. Forget it. Make yourself at home. I'll get a drink for you."

"No, thanks."

"We're way ahead. You gotta catch up."

"Later."

"O.K. It's up to you. The house is yours. Stay and kibitz. Or the women are in the living room. Whichever you choose."

Amos called: "Hey, Steve, come back. Y' got my luck!"

Freda went into the living room, misery tight in her stomach.

The radio was playing dance recordings so earsplittingly loud they could not be enjoyed. Thanks to it, however, the four women sitting there could hardly have heard her arrival or her talk with Steve, and for this Freda was thankful. Even now, in the dimly lighted room, her presence went unnoticed as she stood for several seconds in the doorway, getting herself in hand.

Beside the mountainous Allie Ochs, their hostess, sat Kate Cooper, a fluttery, giggly, middle-aged woman "married," as she frequently said, "to the farm's chicken department." Next to her sat Luella Walsh, soft, dumpy, with little boneless hands and a still, small-mouthed, fleshy face. Her short legs barely touched the floor, and she looked as though the conversation were speeding past too rapidly to be grasped. The fourth woman was Bet Banevsky.

It was Allie who noticed the girl, and the moment she did Freda stepped forward to forestall another greeting like Steve's. She cried above the radio: "Steve told me to come in, Mrs. Ochs. It's awfully nice being here. How do you do, Mrs. Cooper, Mrs. Walsh? Hullo, Bet."

"Hi," Bet said. "Come here and sit down."

"That's Blanche's chair," Allie said, referring to her sister-in-law, Larry's wife. "It's all right, though. Take it. She may not be back. You can get another if she comes."

Luella said softly, "She doesn't like to be this far from liquor."

"She does enjoy it," Allie said calmly. "But I'd certainly rather have that fault than be afraid to try it at all—like some. I want to try everything, bad and good. I always say it's no fun watching others do what you'd like to."

"The pleasures of the flesh," Luella said gently, "are probably natural to you."

Bet muttered, "All evening they been sticking pins in each other."

Kate Cooper giggled. "Freda dear, it's nice having you here. Isn't this your first party? I haven't seen you before. Where's Swan?"

"He can't come summers. He has to get up too early."

"I'm surprised," Kate said, "he'd let you come alone."

"Why not?"

Kate bounced happily. "You're so young, dear—aren't you?"

"Why I don't think so. I'm Duke's age."

"And girls," Bet Banevsky put in, "are always older than boys of the same age, aren't they? Allie always says so."

Freda guessed Bet was on her side. She knew the girl only slightly, related though they were, but was grateful for the support.

"Did Swan know," Luella whispered, "that there'd be drinking?"

"He even said I could try some."

"I'm afraid Swan isn't the person to bring up a growing girl."

Kate tittered. "Yes. How does a girl get to be your age, Freda, without a mother?"

Freda looked from one to another. "But—I— Really, it's been good for me, being left in charge of the house."

"Yes, but— Has Swan ever—discussed things with you?"

The girl was puzzled. How could you answer such a question? Yet she sensed a peculiar eagerness in the three women as they waited, and knew there was something behind the words that she had not grasped.

Bet, trying to help, said: "The poor kid don't know what you're talking about. Leave her alone." It was not much assistance.

Luella said: "Such a critical time for your mother to die! There are so many things a girl your age should know." The plushy voice dropped the words like little chunks of soft butter.

Allie reached for the conversation again: "Come to me sometime, and we'll have a good frank talk. Will you, dear? I think you should. You're much too innocent, really."

But Bet thrust in. "Oh, no! Freda, if there's anything you ever want to talk about, you come to me—"

And Allie said smoothly, "Oh, I don't doubt you could tell her all she'd ever need to know, Betty!"

Freda thought Bet's slow smile stayed on only at some cost. But then Kate giggled: "How's the new boy in the office, Bet? Nice? I had a glimpse of him today, and—my!" And the girl relaxed.

"Yes, very. He's quite handsome. I'm teaching him—the routine."

Allie snorted.

"Has Ida Heim actually taken him into her home?" Luella asked.

"Yes!" Mrs. Ochs took the subject to her mammoth bosom like a returning prodigal. "She admits it's a question of money, but I tell her it's a very foolish thing with two daughters in the house and young Matlock as handsome as he is."

"She might have other ideas," Kate said, hitching about nervously. "I mean, she might be looking for a—a—a husband? For Mary, I mean."

"Mary may have more than a husband, if Ida's not careful!"

"Mary's not nice," Luella said gently but flatly. "Oh, she doesn't paint

much, and those who close their eyes to things say what a fine girl she is, but you watch how she moves—”

“Oh, well,” Allie said, “it’s a period we all go through, isn’t it? It’s only natural. I mean, in animals they have a name for it—”

Kate tittered. Luella whispered: “Don’t, Allie. That’s coarse.”

“It’s plain, that’s all. I’m not one to dress up facts with a phony niceness. I know why some do, of course—why you do. I always did think Red would be almost as interesting a man to be married to as Steve. But then—some women don’t really like men, do they?”

“Allie!”

Bet muttered, “It’s knives now, and Luella can’t take it!”

To Freda the talk was dreadful. Without understanding specifically, she felt its dirtiness, felt smirched and ill; but the illness was tinged with an odd, unwelcome excitement. It went on and on. The room whirled and blurred in a blare of dance music. The air was hot, foul, and smoky, and there was no breeze to move it though every window was open.

Finally Bet’s voice said, “Let’s go watch the boys awhile.” Freda doubted if she could stand, but Bet’s hand under her arm guided her toward the dining room, halted her in the hall. “What’s the matter?”

“Those women,” Freda whispered.

“Oh! Yeah, I know. They love to be nasty. Look, how ’bout a drink? Little one to pull you together?”

“I don’t know,” Freda said.

“Aw, I get fed up too. I wouldn’t ’ve come at all, only Hal was invited and wanted to. Better now? Let’s watch the poker game.”

“Anything.” Freda realized that Hal must be the young stranger at the poker table, and wondered at the oddly possessive note in Bet’s voice.

They went into the dining room, and Duke called, “Hey, Freda, c’m’ere! Bring me luck.” She stood behind him while Bet disappeared toward the kitchen. Duke had five cards in his hand; but Freda didn’t know anything about poker, so she just looked at them and said, “Um!” They must have been good because he raked in the chips.

Bet came back with two glasses.

“I don’t think I should,” the girl said.

“Aw, try it. It’s not strong enough to hurt and might help.”

“I don’t know—”

“Well, never say I forced you.”

Freda took the glass and stood holding it uncertainly.

Bet went to Hal Roane and, putting her folded forearms on the back



of his chair, let one hand hang down and brush his shoulder. Hal frowned, shrugged uncomfortably, and Bet, straightening, took her hand away. Freda felt embarrassed for her.

Watching the byplay, she forgot that the glass in her hand held anything but a soft drink, and presently she had sampled it. It was cold and had a carbonated quality, but was sweetish and funny-tasting, not altogether pleasant. However, it seemed to help the tight sick spot inside her.

The game was boring, but there was nothing else to do. The dull stupidity of the party weighed leadenly, but not yet could she go home and admit Swan was right. The men talked the jumbled jargon of poker, and the occasional vulgarity that slipped out was no help, though she didn't mind it as she minded the nastiness of the women. She understood that men talked so because they were ashamed to say "Oh, fudge!" while women, who could have said "Oh, fudge!" did it because they chose to.

She kept sampling her drink. It was cold in her mouth, comfortingly warm inside, and there seemed to be no other effects.

Not, at least, for a while.

But then, one minute the party was deadly, and the next, without much having changed, it wasn't so bad. The dance music, less blaring in here, crept into her feet; the talk at the table began to make sense, and Steve's running commentary on the game, which had been only irritating, became amazingly funny.

Larry appeared from the kitchen. "Hey! Who wants to eat?"

There was a chorus of response, and at the end of the hand the table was cleared, the women joined them noisily, and the refreshments were served. There was bologna, pressed ham, spiced ham, liverwurst; bread and butter for sandwiches; a plate of cheeses; pickles and relishes; cups of hot coffee.

Freda hadn't eaten since lunch and was hungry.

They ate informally, standing, sitting, or walking around.

Duke said, "What'll you have?" and fixed her a big, masculine sandwich full of a little of everything. It was wonderful. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks." It was too hot for coffee.

"Another drink, then? Your glass is empty."

"Well—" Freda said.

Her first sandwich was gone before he was back with it, and his remarks about her speed and gluttony seemed very amusing. He fixed her another, and she munched happily while he made one for himself. With the sandwiches finished, she felt lots better.

They were all finishing. Duke was saying: "Clear off the table. Clear it off. We want to play some more." But there were defections.

Hal said, "Take my place, Steve. I'm going to dance."

And Mickey Pratt said, "Larry—sit in? I lost all I can afford."

Larry and Steve both sat in.

Mick came around the table. "How about it, Freda? Dance?"

"Uh-huh!"

Bet and Hal had moved the living-room furniture and kicked back the rugs, but they were the only two couples there. Freda loved dancing and did it well, but she had never before felt so relaxed, so comfortable, in a boy's arms or danced so close to one. She shut her eyes and let Mick lead while the music whirled and whirled, and it was wonderful. For the first time she was having fun.

Mick said, "Let's claim our drinks before someone steals 'em."

The women were cleaning up, but Freda felt no urge to help. Duke, who had dropped from the game too, claimed a dance, and after that some of the others cut in. It was quite a rush and all hers, for Bet danced with Hal the whole time. Freda began to feel as she'd dreamed of feeling: the belle of the ball. And she'd almost gone home early!

Then the rush slacked off, and she and Mick stood watching the game, finishing their drinks. She didn't like poker; she wanted to dance and kept humming with the music and bouncing a little. After a while Mick took the hint and led her back to the living room.

Though the radio still played, Hal and Bet had stopped dancing.

Mick said, "Oh—oh, should have knocked!" and marched her out.

Freda was shocked. She had never seen two people kissing like that, and it stirred her, left her trembling.

Mick said, "Let's sit here," and they sat side by side on the stairs, their shoulders brushing. They talked and laughed, and though Freda could never remember afterward what was said, it was deliriously easy and lots of fun. Sitting so close to him gave her an expectant, excited feeling which she did not understand.

Steve found them after a while. "Hey, been lookin' for you. Here: these are yours. Last of the bottle."

"Thank you, sir!" Freda took the glass.

Mick took his too, but said when Steve had gone: "I don't think I'd drink that if I were you. You've had enough."

"But it's so wonderful. No wonder daddy likes it. It makes the party go! So don't be a spoilsport—" She stumbled, giggled. "Just one swallow, Mickey, huh?" She took a couple.

Mick said, "Let's watch the game," and pulled her to her feet while the house rocked ludicrously. "Why not leave your glass here?"

But she felt perverse.

Back in the dining room she knew vaguely that she would have resented Mick's arm about her if it hadn't been the one solid fact left in a dizzy world.

Still, hers was a nice happy unsteadiness. It was fun.

Poker wasn't. The game didn't make sense, and she wanted to dance.

Mick said, "Well, I'll see if it's possible."

"I don't care if it is or not! I want to dance."

She floated with him into the other room, and there were Bet and Hal dancing again, just as though they always had been.

Mick's arms and the music carried her dizzily along.

Gradually, though, the dizziness got ahead of the music, and she stumbled. Something wasn't right with the world.

"Take it easy," Mick said. "Take it easy. You need air."

"I'm all right. I just want to lie down. Let me lie down a minute."

"Let's get out of doors."

She was in two minds about that as he led her to the door. "No—please. Just let me lie down. Anyway, where's my bag? I can't leave it."

"Forget it. You're sick."

"I have to have it. Please, Mick! I won't go without it."

"Oh, hell!" the boy said. "All right. Grab the door and hang on."

He was an interminable time. Then he was thrusting something into her fingers and helping her through the screen, onto the porch. Coolness hit her face and felt good.

"Don't stop here," Mick said.

He forced her off the porch, across the dirt road, up the low bank beyond and through the hedge of spruce into the orchard.

"O.K.," he said. "Go ahead."

"Uh-uh."

"Don't be a damn fool! Get rid of it. I'll get you some water."

By the time he came back, she no longer cared whether he was there or not. His hand, cool on her forehead, was even welcome, and so was the glass he offered her.

"I went to the boarding house," he said, "so they wouldn't know. You rest a minute, then I'll take you home."

He helped her to a comfortable spot and stood silently by while she held her head in her hands. She knew what had happened: she'd got tight! So tight she'd had to have the help of a barn hand.

"Mick," she said, whispering, "you mustn't ever tell! Promise!"  
"Naw," Mick said. "You better now?"  
"I feel awful!" She began to cry, great slow painful tears.  
"Aw, cut it! If you're set, let's go home."  
He helped her up and steadied her as she walked.  
She said, "I don't want to meet anyone. I'm so ashamed, Mick!"  
"It could happen to anyone, first time. You get to know when to stop."  
"I don't ever want any more. I feel awful."  
"Sure. But get some sleep and you'll be all right. . . . Here we are."  
"Sh! Don't wake— Don't come any farther."  
"O.K." He seemed to understand and stood watching while she went slowly up the porch steps alone and fumbled her way into the house. Inside, it was utterly quiet. She kept hoping right to the top of the stairs that Swan hadn't stayed awake to listen for her.  
He had, though, as she might have known . . .

## VI

WHARTON PETITT shook his head. "No, no, no! No advances before the 12th, Isaac."

The tall man across the desk shrugged. "Vat's a few days? You could stretch it once. I need it terrible." The bookkeeper shook his head. "I could get twenty-five, perhaps, instead of thirty?"

"No."

"I could make twenty do, even, but that much I gotta have. How can I buy feed with no money? I'll wait and see Ed."

"Might as well save your breath."

But Isaac Ledmuller shuffled to a chair. He was a thin man with graying hair whose cadaverousness made his nose and jutting head seem predatory; but beneath bushy brows his sunken eyes were sad and gentle.

Thomas, arriving soon, hurried into his office with a brief "Hello, Isaac. How are you?" pretending he was busy, but Ledmuller rose and followed.

"You got a minute? Wednesday I asked the boy for an advance—"

"He told me. I said No. Not before the 12th."

"Sure. I heard. But maybe you'd make the rule an exception?" He

closed the door between the offices. "I need fifty dollars, Ed. Terrible. You couldn't know how terrible."

"The 12th is Tuesday. You'll get your May check then."

"Four days I could make my creditors wait? And Pettitt says already I've overdrawn. It couldn't happen, but he says so. I shipped so much milk, I don't believe it."

"Isaac, you've a bill with us—remember? You bought four heifers once, four thoroughbred two-year-olds with a high production record behind them. Mr. Wycoff let you have 'em at inventory price—a hundred-twenty-five apiece—though they were worth more. You were to have a little deducted from your check each month to pay for them. That was five years ago, but not only is the five hundred still owed, but you've managed—God knows how!—to add fifty to it."

"I'll pay it," Ledmuller insisted. "Sure I will. Right now, if I can't have fifty I could get by on forty, maybe."

"I haven't been unreasonable, Isaac. I've heeded your cries of distress and postponed installment payments, let you buy things here, given you advances. I've done my share. Now I'm tightening up. There'll be no more favors till you've shown me evidence of settling the account."

"What could I do? I can't pay you. I ain't got it. To stay in business, even, I gotta have thirty-five at least."

"I'll make you an offer: give me your four best heifers and we'll cancel the bill and forget the interest. That's fair."

"Y' running me out from the milk business!" Isaac cried. "Can I get milk without cows? You take my heifers, what happens to my herd? I got no money to buy new ones to make milk enough to make money."

"Suppose I buy that piddling retail route of yours—for the price of the bill. That's more than it's worth. You'd still have your cows. And if you'd concentrate on producing, you'd make money. It's these side lines—"

"It's my living!" Ledmuller howled. "I ain't selling. No, sir! Benkrut me. Go ahead. What could it get you?"

"I don't want that. All I want is evidence of good faith."

"Good faith, you got it: instead of fifty dollars, gimme thirty—and take twenty against the bill."

"You'd be back next week for more."

"Could I make thirty last a month? No. But wit' seventy-five more on the 25th— You could still charge off twenty this month."

Thomas sighed. "All right, Isaac, but this is a warning. I'm out of patience. I'm through fooling."

Ledmuller said, "You could trust me."

"O.K." Ed led the way to the outer office. "Whart, give Isaac thirty dollars. He's to have seventy-five more on the 25th—and that's all. Charge twenty off his bill on the 30th."

Pettitt's face was harsh with disgust and contempt.

## VII

"IN a few years," Barchi said, "it'll be different. We'll have an eight-hour day and a five-day week and a forty-a-week guarantee. It'll be part of the new Wage-Hour Act."

Ben Goetz said mildly, "We couldn't deliver and collect our routes in eight hours." He hated arguing, but felt somebody should.

"The dairy 'll have to put on a special man to collect and another to sell. All we'll do is run the routes."

"Oh, pipe down!" Tom North said. "I'm trying to add." Tom drove Route Two and was a plain, stolid man.

"I can't figure you out," Barchi said. "Don't you care if you're rooked? Do you want to be suckers all your life?"

"If we gonna get it in a few years," Tom said, "why should we worry? So shut up. I can't hear myself think."

Hal Roane asked, "Do we get paid as much as the office force?"

"Ha! Want to know what Thomas gets? Twice what we do—and for what? When it rains, he's inside. When the sun's too hot, he's got a big fan to cool him. But where are we? Out in it! And what does he do?"

"Makes policy," Ben said. "Makes all the decisions—"

"Ask the department heads! Hey, Chief?"

"You betcha, chief," Myhychyk said indifferently.

Hal said, "Maybe he should be on a piecework basis."

Barchi's eyes flicked his way, frowning. "Look," he said, "all we got to do to get shorter hours, bigger commissions, a guarantee, anything we want, is to get together—"

"Yeah?" Ben said. "Suppose the farm won't cooperate?"

"We could strike, and they'd have to. Ain't that right, Chief?"

Ben stumbled in the act of rising. Tom North lifted startled eyes. Jake Larsen stared down at the order he was writing, his pencil motionless. Even Myhychyk failed in his stock line. After a couple of seconds he muttered, "What you want to do, chief?—get fired?"

Barchi said: "Hell, they couldn't fire any of us if we stuck together. How could they get the milk out? If they fired one, all the rest 'd walk out! See? We'd have 'em by the short hairs!"

Ben got up slowly and took his money and route book to Carly Groce. The others returned to work in peculiar silence.

Barchi felt their hostility. The word "strike" had frightened them.

## VIII

"THE sink," Ida Heim said over pie at dinner, "was stopped up this morning. I never *had* such a time getting help."

Because no one else offered comment or sympathy, Clint murmured, "I heard you talking to Pettitt in the office. I hope—"

"To Pettitt!" Ida snorted. "To everybody. Of course I didn't expect much of Red Walsh—his head's too full of air conditioning to bother with plumbing. Still, I hoped he'd send one of his helpers. But oh, no! They were busy. He insinuated I poured grease down the drain. Me!"

There was another gap. Adrian ate mechanically. The two girls, opposite Clint, nudged each other beneath the table's edge, paying more covert attention to Clint than to their mother. The young man was embarrassed, though he now knew that Ida neither needed nor expected feeders. Still, he felt he should say something.

"I'm afraid you didn't get much help from Whart either."

"Whart! Why, even Ed Thomas tried to put me off. This place gets worse by the day. Why can't they take care of our houses? A head carpenter should have time to repair his own at least. Adrian!"

Adrian said: "Uh? Oh, sure. Sure, Ida. Once the maternity barn's done—" But Clint would have sworn he had not been following the talk.

"When it's done! When the receiving room's built. When the barns are painted. When the chicken runs are repaired. Only then there's always something else to be started. Ed has no intention of fixing any of these houses. . . . Well, why don't you say something?"

"Uh? Sorry, Ida. I guess I'm tired."

"Tired. You don't know the meaning of the word, you men! How hard you think you have it! Do you realize I begin before you're out of bed in the morning, and that I'm still at it long after you stop? Oh,

I'd like to see you struggle through one day of housework. Just one. And it isn't as though I were strong and well. I'm not complaining, but I haven't been right for twenty years. Not since Mary was born."

No one said anything. Clint mumbled, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Heim."

"Mary," Ida told him, "was a seven-months child. The doctor said I should never have had Eunice at all, but Adrian wanted a boy so badly it seemed a shame—She didn't help me any."

Clint was surprised. So many subjects were taboo in the girls' presence that he should have supposed this would be also. It was so odd that he remembered it afterward.

Adrian shoved back his chair, and the girls rose with him. Clint lingered over a glass of water. "I'll help you with the dishes."

"You don't need to. No one else ever does."

But he began carrying dishes to the kitchen. Someone in the living room turned on the radio. Clint found a dishrag and wiped the table.

Ida said: "Adrian has some excuse: he really is tired. They work him to death. He's a department head, but you never catch him standing around gabbing like Steve Ochs or Charlie Dann. He works like a hand, and has for thirteen years. Well, he isn't as young as he used to be. He wasn't always so thin, and his shoulders weren't always so stooped. He used to be quite handsome—" She paused, her face softening, but the bitterness remained close to the surface. "He must have had something. God knows what I saw in him if it wasn't his looks!" She ran water viciously into the pan. "He's certainly no help around the house. Nor are the girls. Allie says I've failed with them, but that isn't so. It's a streak of their father's family coming out. I've tried my best to command their love and respect, but they've grown more and more selfish and secretive. I don't understand them."

"Most of us pass through the stage," Clint said. "Growing up is a process parents can't help with."

"Or be too careful with," Ida said tartly. "You thought I was peculiar the other day, the way I talked; but precautions are necessary. You're a better type than the farm usually employs, or you wouldn't be here; but even so I decided a warning would do no harm."

"Don't worry. I'm innocuous."

"No man is. I know what it is to be young, and I know the pitfalls. The girls are impressionable. Do you know Freda Ellis?"

"I don't think so. Not yet."

"Well, she's Eunice's age—and she's in trouble. It's so easy! They think



they're grown-up, sophisticated, and they don't know a thing. Any man can take advantage of them."

Clint said mildly, "Most men aren't such villains."

"I wouldn't trust one of you. And this farm help—" She paused. "Two summers ago, the house next to this—where the Ihloffs live now—was the farm's boarding house. One night two barn boys came home late, drunk. They claimed they mistook this house for the other. They came in and went upstairs and didn't discover their mistake till they turned on the lights in the girls' bedroom. So they said."

"At least they turned on the lights," Clint said wryly.

"They were drunk. They probably thought they were being very quiet, but I heard them. I sleep lightly." This was stressed a bit. "I got Adrian up and we found them actually beside the girls' beds."

He wanted to ask what the girls were doing, but thought it unwise. The whole thing struck him as very funny.

"They actually tried to make out it was *we* who were in the wrong house. Well, they soon found out who was—and were pretty sorry for it."

"In what way?"

"I had them fired," Ida said. "And saw to it that a new boarding house was built far enough away to avoid future mistakes."

Clint's amusement faded. This seemed rather drastic. Ida, he decided, must be a terror on wheels. It was something to remember.

And exactly, he thought, what she wanted him to remember!

When the dishes were done and the kitchen straightened, they went into the living room. Mary and Eunice were off in a corner whispering. Adrian was in the big chair by the radio, head back on a cushion, eyes closed. He was smiling over a family serial.

"Are you listening to that trash again?" Ida began. "Every night! Week in, week out. I should think you'd get sick of it. I do. Let's have something we can all enjoy."

"Sure. Anything." But the large, long-fingered, clever hands remained motionless, and Ida had to go over and change the radio herself. When she had found a program of popular classics that was to her taste, Adrian rose slowly, crossed to a wall table and returned with a copy of a pseudo-scientific pulp magazine.

Ida said, "Mr. Matlock, being in the office, you should be able to do something about—what we were speaking of—the type of men the farm employs. How can they expect responsibility of boys with no education or intelligence? And the turnover! A woman would manage better. She

wouldn't hire drifters but men with intelligence who want to settle down and make something of themselves."

Adrian said, "Not on the wages the farm pays, she wouldn't."

"Think of the risk of hiring this sort. How do we know who they are? They could be criminals. Murderers, even. We'd never know till it was too late. Look at that Flemhos boy. He's crazy! And the other—Fusek. He's utterly irresponsible—and dirty."

Mary said, "Mother—"

"Hush! Wait till the program's over."

"But you're talking. I only wanted to ask: Can we go to a movie? Eunice and I?"

"Alone? No, certainly not. Not on a Saturday night—"

"Couldn't Mr. Matlock go with us?"

"No, he can't. The idea of suggesting it."

"Well, alone then?" Mary was a large blonde girl and looked, Clint thought, as Ida must once have looked: vividly pretty but with a sulky cast of feature.

"I said No."

"But why? I'm not a baby any more. You've scared off all the boys who used to ask me out; now you won't even let me go with my own sister. Why not? Why should I sit here doing nothing every night?"

"Mary! Your tone. Saturday night is no night for girls to be out alone. You can always ask friends here."

"Friends! What friends?"

"I'm glad to have you know anyone but these barn boys—"

"Who else is there? That's just an excuse anyway. You object to all boys. Why? What's the matter with them?"

"Mary! You're losing control of your voice."

"Well, I like boys. I like dancing with them, being with them. It's only natural, isn't it? Boys and girls were meant to go together—"

"I think you'd better go up to your room, Mary."

"You can't stop how I feel by telling me not to feel that way."

Ida snapped, "How often must I speak? Go upstairs and stay there."

"I won't!"

"Adrian! Speak to her."

Heim sighed. "Better go upstairs for now, Mary."

"Daddy, why won't you help me?"

"Because your mother"—Adrian hesitated—"is quite right."

Mary's defiance collapsed in a flurry of tears, and she fled. Eunice followed, and Clint heard their feet in the upper hall.

In the living room there was silence.

Adrian asked, "Why didn't you let them go, Ida?"

"Don't you dare question my judgment, Adrian Heim! You heard how she talked. No telling what trouble she might get into."

"Being strict won't prevent it," Adrian observed quietly. "And you exaggerate the danger, you know—"

"I guess you haven't heard about the Ellis girl!"

"What about her?"

"Swan was fool enough to let her go to that party at the Ochses' Thursday night. It was a brawl. There was drinking—and she got drunk. Disgracefully. Allie herself told me."

Adrian made a face. "We're all entitled to one binge."

"That's not the worst. Freda and one of the barn boys were together all evening, dancing, sitting on the stairs, flirting shamelessly. Well, knowing those boys, you can guess what happened."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know, but he left the house with Freda, without saying thank you or goodbye or anything—and neither came back. Next morning—yesterday—one of the Ochs children found Freda's handbag across the road in the orchard. In the bushes." Ida paused dramatically. "That," she said, "is what can happen to a young girl right here on the farm. You think I'm foolish to be careful. Well, maybe! But I don't intend to be the fool Swan was. My girls will get no chance to get themselves in jams."

Clint woke in the morning with Ida's harsh voice still in his ears. It might have been an ugly echo of his dreams, but actually it was borne by the slight, chill breeze through the open window.

"You knew what was going on, Kate. You must have!"

He heard Kate Cooper's uneasy giggle. "No, really. I never thought! She went out simply clinging to him, but I— Well, she seemed sick."

"But after the way they'd been acting—"

"Well, they'd been dancing, and they'd been sitting on the stairs so close their— they were touching. And once they came into the dining room and he had his arm around her, practically holding her up, but—"

"You still think she was sick?"

"But she was so awfully pale—"

"You're naïve, Kate. Take it from me—"

Clint rolled out of bed and lowered the window with a bang. Damn the woman! She was hipped on adolescent sex.

With his own adolescence not far behind, Clint resented it. He knew nothing of the Ellis girl, and it was surely no concern of his; still Ida's attitude, her clear intention of spreading the tale, grated in his soul. He went down to breakfast in an ugly temper and was for once as tight-lipped and silent as the rest of the family. Afterward, he walked to the office.

Dairies, like many other businesses, work a seven-day week, and Weyland Meadows' office force split the week-end duty between them, Pettitt, Carly, and Clint working every third Saturday afternoon, Carly and Clint every other Sunday morning. Clint's first Sunday on the farm was his to work, and, uncertain of routes and details though he still was, he had agreed to take it.

He had the office to himself most of the morning. There were a few telephone calls, but he had plenty of time to consider Ida and the unknown Ellis girl. When Ed Thomas dropped in after church he was staring idly from the window toward the Ellis back yard, where two or three youngsters were playing.

"Hello, Clint. How are things? Any trouble?"

"No. The drivers called. Only one order went by special delivery."

"Good." Ed sat on the radiator near him. "Now you've been here a few days, how do you like us?"

"I hardly know—"

"It's quite a place: lots to dislike, lots to be changed—but alive."

"Ed, what's the Ellis girl like?"

"Who? Ellis? Oh, I don't know. Freda's pretty. Good deal to her, I think; does all our housework besides going to school—"

"I mean, is she— Well, there's a story going around—"

Ed frowned. "Something I ought to know?"

"Perhaps—living there, and being close to Swan. They say she went to the Ochses' party the other night—"

"Um. I remember."

"—and got tight and left for the bushes with some barn boy, I don't know who. Ida Heim had it from Mrs. Ochse, and she's spreading it."

"These—God—damn—farm—women!"

"What's the girl like?" Clint insisted. "I've met Swan—"

"She's as decent as he; just as damn nice as her mother was. But every now and then these women think up some blasted story that—" He shut his lips tightly. Then he said: "Thanks for telling me. They'll be on my neck in a day or two, and I'll need an answer ready. Perhaps Swan should be warned too."

He turned suddenly, opened the window, and leaned out. "Steve! Come up a minute." And when the plant manager came through the door: "What's this story about your party?"

"I dunno. What is it?"

"I hear Freda Ellis—"

"Oh! Hey . . ." Embarrassment replaced truculence. "Goddam it, Ed, I'm sorry. How'd I know she'd— I said, 'Have a drink,' when she first came, and she said No. That suited me. But someone else give her one—more'n one, I guess. Anyway, I saw her with a glass, so I cut her in on the last round. How'd I know she'd get plastered?"

"She did, then?"

"We all of us had too much. Couple of guys brought their own bottles. Oh, we had a lot more than usual. . . . She shouldn't ever have come, see? That was my fault. I was invitin' someone else when she was around, so I said, 'You come too,' the way a guy does. When she showed up, what could I do?"

"They say she and some barn boy ended the evening in the orchard."

"Yeah. She got sick. Mickey Pratt took care of her, took her home."

"You sure she was sick?"

"Sure. What—" Steve's eyes widened. "Holy Christ, Ed! What story's getting around? Nuts! She was sick all right. I seen enough to know. Besides, Mickey's all right."

"I'd have said so myself. Still, in the future, Steve, better leave the kids out of your invitations."

"I know I should 've, goddam it! I ain't sneaking out. Only nothing worse happened than the girl's gettin' tight. I'll swear to that."

"O.K." And when Steve had gone: "I think I'll look up young Pratt. Want to come along? It's time to close up here."

Events were moving more rapidly than Clint had anticipated. He was not happy, but thought it best to tag along. They shut the office and, walking the short distance down the drive to the boarding house, called Mickey Pratt from his dinner and took him to the upstairs dormitory for privacy. He seemed to Clint an average sort. A frizzle of beard darkened his thin, sharp features, but on the whole he looked cleaner and neater than most of the barn hands.

Ed said, "What's this I hear about you and Freda Ellis?"

Pratt looked scared. He went livid as Ed told him, briefly and crudely, what was being said, and seemed hardly able to voice a protest. He said: "Uh-uh. No. No, I didn't. I didn't do anything like that!" He sounded stifled.

"They're saying you did."

"But—she doesn't, does she? 'Cause, honest, she wasn't feelin' good—see? She'd had too much to drink. I *had* to take her to the orchard. But then I took her right home. Honest to God, Ed, I never touched her! You gotta believe me! She doesn't say I—I—"

"She hasn't been asked. But some of the women saw you go out and knew Freda had been drinking—"

"Honest," Pratt said, "I didn't!" He was trembling, but his face and manner were deadly serious now. It was a forthright denial.

Clint believed him, and Thomas nodded. "O.K., Mickey. I'll talk to Swan; but if he's satisfied, and if these damned women don't raise too much fuss, there'll be no more said."

"If!" Pratt repeated. "You mean— But I *didn't do it!*"

"Well, don't worry. The story may die of its own accord."

"But—oh, man!—even if— You can't—"

Thomas had said more than he intended. He muttered hastily, "Come on, Clint," and turned to the stairs. But Mickey was on his heels.

"Ed, if you believe me, you can't— For something I didn't do. For helping a girl when she was sick! No matter what they say—"

They emerged from the boarding house to find the two barn boys, Dick and Boo, walking past on the drive. The latter sang out a cheery "Hiya, Mistuh Thomas!" and with marked relief Ed waved back.

"Hello there, Bool Dick. How're all the cows today?"

Boo Fusek caroled, "Swell! Purdy day, ain't it?"

Dick Flemhos nodded sullenly, said nothing.

As the two reached the foot of the drive, they turned right on the County Road, and Ed said, "Now I wonder where they're headed? . . . You happen to know, Mickey?"

"Home, I guess. But look, Ed—"

"Home! . . . Where are they living?"

"In that place that used to be used by the greenhouse man—"

"They are, uh? Who else is over there with them?"

"No one, I guess. . . . But, Ed, you wouldn't make trouble for me—"

Thomas said to Clint: "Remind me to speak to Whart about those two. They oughtn't to live there alone. They'll get into trouble."

Neither Clint nor Pratt was fooled; Thomas was only trying to change the subject.

"I wonder if we've been charging them rent," he continued.

A door slammed at the Ellises' and Clint saw a girl on the distant back

porch. She was small, slim, and her bright gold hair caught the sun as she called in a clear, untroubled voice for the boys to come to dinner. He said, "If that's Freda, I'd say she was all right."

"Of course she is." Thomas sounded annoyed. "But these damned farm women may—" He drew a breath, held it till his face went red. "What I could say about them! As a dairy, Weyland Meadows is fine, but some of the people on it are—" He stopped and after a moment shrugged. "I have to go to dinner, I guess. Just as well. . . . So long, Clint."

## IX

THE radio was thudding away at the jiggly dance music Roxy loved. Charlie Dann hated it; but if he turned it off she'd talk, and it was the lesser evil. Even listening to it, she kept fidgeting, whispering, "Oh, dear!" "Oh, well!" "Oh, gee!" hinting she was bored. She added finally, "What's wrong with Mickey, huh? I thought he was comin' over. . . . Huh, Charlie?"

"Na-ah."

She sighed. "He ain't been here in so long. Whyn't y' ask him, huh?"

"He's got too friendly with Steve Ochs."

"Oh! . . . I can't figure you, Charlie. Whatcha wanta fight with people for? Gee, if we made friends, we could have some fun like we used to. Steve might even of invited us to his party, and we'd been in on the excitement. They're sayin' awful things about Mick an' Freda Ellis, ain't they?"

"Getting in trouble serves Mick right. They're crazy, though."

"Ain't it true?" Her voice squeaked up in a way he hated, and her disappointment was plain. He had thought once the way she talked was cute; but cuteness sat poorly on a woman of—what? She was sixteen years younger than he; that made her thirty-two.

Thirty-two, and she looked every year of it, he thought with distaste. Her once-platinum hair had become a variety of shades and straggled badly. Lines puckered about the baby-eyes, and the big lips pouted with discontent. It was hard to imagine how pretty she had seemed once, and Charlie knew he had been fooled by gay clothes and a coat of paint.

He said, "Mick wouldn't fool around with a girl."

"Wouldn't he? Gee, I do' know. Girls go for him. He's— Now don't get mad, Charlie! Gee, I didn't mean anything. You're so jealous!"

"I know how far I can trust you," Dann said.

"Aw, Charlie, I wouldn't look at another guy. Whatcha think I am?"

What did he think she was? Charlie had never answered that question even to himself. Whatever she was, she was his and his alone—and she was going to stay his.

She said ramblingly: "I wouldn't look at Mick. Gee! Only what other friends we got? Who do we ever see but him? And you never take me any place. All we do is sit and look at each other—"

"I suppose you think that's fun for me?"

"What you got against Steve? I don't see what's wrong with him."

Charlie said grimly, "He's jockeying to be manager."

"Well, what of it? What's the diff? Anyway, there oughta be somebody—the Ellises, or the Walshes, or somebody—we could be friends with. Or at least you could take me to a movie. We don't have to sit around every night doing nothing, do we? We could go some place for a beer or— Gee, when I was in the theayter, I had fun. People—"

"You left it. Things are different now."

"I'll say! I had champagne a couple times then. People in dress suits— Gee, I ain't seen one in a long time. Fun ev'ry night. Music—"

"Quit it! It wasn't so damn wonderful. You weren't in the theater anyway: you were in a chorus, and a pretty lousy one at that."

"It was not! It was a good one. The boys in the front row liked us all right and were waitin' to take us out afterwards."

"Shut up, you—"

But she cried, "Why should I? I like remembering. I was happier then than I've ever been—"

"Maybe you should have stayed there. You knew I wouldn't buy you champagne or music or fun, didn't you? Then why give 'em up to marry me? What did you want of me? What did you see in me?"

Roxy stammered uncertainly, "Well, gee! You asked— I liked— You said you were a big businessman; you said you'd soon be head of a real big dairy plant. Gee, I believed you. I didn't know you were just a barn man, or that we'd be married twelve years and more before—"

She stopped. Charlie hadn't moved; but his pointed fox face had gone as gray as the stiff, high pompadour above it, and a pulse beat in his temple. Roxy was suddenly afraid.

"I was kidding," she said. "Charlie! I was kidding, that's all."



There was a moment before his shoulders slumped. He said, "I'm going to bed."

Roxy gulped. She almost said, "I'll come too," but a peculiar feeling stopped her. Maybe she had better wait awhile.

## X

THERE were two old mattresses in the Ellis attic, close under the eaves behind a discarded bureau and some boxes of old toys; and here Freda had made herself a soft, secret nest to which she came often to be by herself and dream. This was Monday, and she should have been doing the wash; but the weather had come off cloudy and raw and, since hanging clothes inside was also impossible, she had postponed it and come to her hideaway to brood while the wind whined about the eaves and spatters of rain drummed on the roof.

It was four days since the party, but the sting of shame was still keen. She had made a spectacle of herself, and by now, she was sure, all the farm knew she had been intoxicated and sick; and she fancied people must know, too, about Friday, though Friday's horror had been private. She had wakened feeling fair; but before breakfast was on the table sickness had engulfed her. The sourness of those drinks had penetrated every tissue, leaving mind and body acidly ugly. Mouth, head, and stomach had revolted at the very thought of eating, and she had fled the curious eyes of the household to spend the day miserably between bedroom and bath. Not until after another night's sleep had she felt normal again.

Oh, she had had her lesson, had Freda. She would take no more alcohol, ever, ever, ever!

In her shame and misery, it was Mickey Pratt whom she blamed. She hated him fiercely because it was he who had rushed her from the Ochses' when, if he had only let her lie down, she would have been quite all right, and also because— Well, the worst thing about the whole evening had been his presence while she was so violently sick. She wanted to die, she was so mortified.

It seemed to her that she could never face anyone on the farm again. She knew how unmercifully the men at the creamery would kid her, and how the women would look down their superior noses; so she had

stayed, so far, close to the house. She was even self-conscious with Ed Thomas—he had regarded her oddly yesterday—and with the boys, though none of them had mentioned the party. She would have liked to curl up here in the attic and stay hidden forever.

As for Swan—well, Swan had been wonderful, in a way.

He had helped her to bed that ghastly night, had listened to her wailed explanations, but had said little then or later. "It might happen to anyone, Freda. It's all right." That was all. Friday, quietly, he had telephoned to her school and had a scheduled examination postponed.

No questions, no scolding, not even an I-told-you-so. And after she had wheedled his permission with a storm of tears to go to the party!

It would have been easier, far easier, if he had punished her. Then she might not have felt so bitterly ashamed.

Downstairs, the front door slammed, and Freda raised herself on one elbow to listen. A voice called her name, and her eyes widened because it was hours yet before Swan was due home.

Slipping swiftly from her hiding place, she hurried down. Her father was waiting in the lower hall, and though it was always hard to be sure of his moods she sensed behind his stiff face something that set cold tingles of apprehension dancing in her veins.

"You alone in the house, Freda?"

"Y-yes." Perhaps he had decided, after all, on punishment.

He led her to the living room. "Sit down." He himself went to a window and stood looking out, his black raincoat white where the gray light turned its wetness shiny.

Freda held her breath, her heart pounding, for his manner was portentous.

"Freda, did you tell me everything that happened Thursday night? You said you'd had too much to drink and had been taken sick—and that Mickey Pratt had brought you home. But is that—all?"

"Uh-huh."

"Nothing else happened? Nothing you're frightened—or ashamed—to tell me about?"

"N-no, daddy. I don't know what you mean. What—"

He turned to look at her, and for a long moment held her wide, bewildered eyes. "O.K. That's that." And he started to go.

It was much less than she had expected, and for an instant she was speechless. Then, as Swan reached the front door, she cried suddenly: "Oh, but, daddy, wait! What—I don't understand. What is it you think happened?"

"Nothing. I heard a lie, but it doesn't matter."

"But what?"

"It makes no difference, Freda—"

"But it does. Can't you understand: I have to know! What are they saying about me?"

Wrinkles narrowed Swan's eyes. He hadn't thought she would take it with bewilderment and terror. He said, "I didn't want to upset you, Freda. I'm sorry; but I—I'd rather not explain—"

"But please, daddy, can't you understand? You've made such a—a mystery of it, it must be—something awful, something—worse than getting drunk, something horrible. And I don't even know what you think it is! Can't you see I have to know!"

He said awkwardly, "I was afraid that—young Pratt might have—taken liberties before bringing you home."

"Liberties?" In a whisper: "I—don't . . ."

Swan had only a man's vocabulary. Turning an unaccustomed red because the words were stiff, unnatural, and silly, he floundered: "I was afraid he might have—violated your modesty . . ."

"Violated—" Freda went scarlet herself, and her voice emerged muffled. "Oh, no! It—it was dark. Besides, I was wearing that flowered print, and it's—it's fairly tight around the—the chest." In embarrassed confusion, she blurted: "But I don't think he even tried to see. He was—real nice."

Swan was well answered. He said, "You're all right, girl! I believe you. So forget the whole thing."

As he turned to go, a smile twitched the corner of his mouth. Slight as it was, Freda caught it. The uncertain relief she had begun to feel was swept away in the knowledge that she was being laughed at. What she had answered had not been what he had meant!

But what had he meant? What was Pratt supposed to have done? What terrible thing was it that her father had heard, that the farm must be saying about her?

She stood in the doorway staring after the black raincoat while the damp cold wind whipped at her skirt. A quivering, fluttery fear throbbed below her heart.

Eunice Heim came home from school Wednesday afternoon, entering the house on crepe-soled sport shoes so quietly that Mary, flat on her stomach on the sofa, failed to hear her till the screen door banged. Guiltily thrusting a book under the cushions, the older girl raised a

startled, defiant face. Then she said, "Oh, it's you!" and the book came out again. "Why so sneaky?"

"What you reading?" Eunice tossed her notebooks and a pencil box onto a chair as Mary showed her the title. "Oh! So mama isn't home?"

"She's around the farm somewhere."

"Then you got a nerve! . . . Let me have it after you, huh?"

"You're still a kid."

"I am not! I'll bet I know more'n you. You better let me, or else."

"All right, tattletale—after I finish."

"Any pictures?"

"Just some diagrams. Drawings."

"Oh. Y' better hide it 'fore she comes. I got an int'rest in it now."

"Fff!" And then idly, as Eunice picked up her notebooks again: "So you're through school? Pass your exams?"

"Oh, I'll graduate, I guess, even if I'm no Freda Ellis."

"What's Freda got to do with it?"

"She's valedictorian. . . . She's been acting awful funny recently."

"Funny peculiar or funny ha-ha?"

"She was sick Friday and missed an exam. And then Monday she came looking pretty good, but yesterday, when I tried to have lunch with her, she practically ran off. And she ran away from me after school too. I can't figure what's eating her."

"A valedictorian has to make a speech, don't she? I'll bet Freda's scared. I would be—and she never had much nerve."

"Oh, she and Ernie Schaffer have to talk all right, but—"

"Gosh! Ernie didn't turn out to be—"

"Yeah."

"What a laugh! What are they talking about?"

"Freda's topic is 'The Student's View of Social Legislation.'"

Mary made a face. "Prob'ly it hasn't gone so good—"

"She told me a month ago it was almost written, and she liked it."

"Um. But getting up before the school's different. Freda's shy—"

"But she was proud to be the—"

Eunice stopped, for Ida Heim was standing in the doorway and neither girl had heard her coming. From the corner of her eye, Eunice saw the book lying open in front of her sister; but it might have been any book provided only that Mary didn't try to shove it out of sight.

"Freda's speaking before the school?" Ida asked.

Guilty awareness of the book being foremost in the minds of both

girls, it took them a moment to see that she was at her most tight-lipped. Eunice stammered, "Yes, ma. At—at graduation."

"The nerve!" Ida said.

Eunice gasped. "Why?"

But Mrs. Heim sewed her lips together, turned, and was at the front door before she remembered something she wanted to add.

She came back. "I'll ask you two not to see much of Freda this summer," she said, "—if she's around this summer!"

"But why?" Eunice protested.

"She's not the kind of girl who'd do you any good."

"But, ma—"

"Trust my judgment," Ida said. "Don't let me catch you with her!"

Eunice ran to the front window as the door banged purposefully, and watched her mother going rapidly across the lawns.

Mary sighed. "Woof! She never noticed it—the book!"

"Why's she all steamed up over Freda?"

"Maybe you're right. Maybe something's wrong with her."

"Something to do with a boy, I bet, the way ma's taking on."

"Who? Freda! Naah. . . . So we're not to see her? . . . H'mph! Well, I don't care. I never saw much of her anyway."

"I'm seeing her," Eunice said. "I'm going to find out what happened."

"You don't dare."

"I do too. Just wait till ma's out of sight!" She was silent, watching. "She's going to the Ochses'. I might have known. . . . Want to come?"

"Say, wait! You want to get ruined?"

But Eunice Heim had gone.

Mary shrugged, rose, and went upstairs. Prudence dictated more privacy and less comfort if she were to go on reading. No telling when her mother would be back, and her coming in so quietly had been disconcerting.

Eunice paused near the Ochses' kitchen door to eavesdrop.

Ida was speaking. ". . . to have her held up as an honored example, a girl who could do what Freda did! She's not the sort of heroine for young people."

"I never see a brightie yet who was heroine to a bunch of kids," Allie said placidly. "See if my Duke, who plays football, don't get a better hand getting his diploma than she does."

"That's not the point. They're honoring her—and she's a wanton. Suppose she told! You know how girls talk among themselves. And the

kind who misbehave are the kind who boast. A fine thing! I've forbidden my girls to have anything to do with her, and I won't have them listening to her on a platform either! You don't want Duke to, I'm sure."

"I guess she couldn't tell Duke much," Allie said with pride. "Anyway, you take it all too serious. What can you do?"

"I could tell the principal she misconducted herself, tell him the place, the date, and the name of the boy. What more could he want?"

Eunice listened open-mouthed, almost unbelieving, while a tingling of envy crept through her. Imagine Freda having the nerve!

Allie said, "He might want to know if you were there."

"If I wasn't, there were plenty who were. You, for one."

"Well, don't count on me. I hate trouble."

This must have been unexpected, for there was a gap. Then Ida said, "So you've got cold feet. Well, there are other ways. There'll be plenty of Weyland Meadows women at the exercises: Mary and me and Mrs. Ihloff to watch Eunice graduate; and Kate might come if I asked—"

"She's coming"—complacently. "She takes an interest in Duke."

"Oh! Well—there'll be you and your family. And the Walshes, of course; they're your friends, too! And the Larry Ochses, I suppose. That makes enough. We could all sit together, and when Freda gets up—"

"What?" Allie asked.

"Well, we could hiss—not let her speak."

A long moment. Then Allie sighed. "Well, don't count on me—"

"Why not?"

"It's too mean, Ida."

"Mean! After what she did—"

"As a matter of fact, Ida, we might have been wrong about—the other night."

"Wrong? Why, you told me yourself—"

"I know. But Steve says I was wrong. He says she was sick."

There was a moment of dead silence. Ida's voice, when it came, trembled with cold anger. "I guess I understand now. Well, I'm thankful, Allie, that I don't have to call black white for any man! So I'll get no help from you?"

"I hope it don't spoil your plans—"

"It won't. There may not be one woman here who believes in decency enough to help me; but I know what I know, and what I can do about it: a hint to Freda that there'll be booing if she tries to speak, and she won't dare! That's all I have to do." A chair scraped. "You make me tired. Good-bye."

Eunice, galvanized out of fascinated immobility, ducked around the house and raced for the Ellises'. Through the kitchen screen she gasped at Freda, "You here alone?" and saw the girl jump, shooting a panicky glance toward the back stairs.

"Oh! . . . Oh, you—you scared me!"

Her nervousness made Eunice hesitate. "Anyone else here?"

"No-o." But a breathless Freda was poised tensely for flight. "Why? What do you want?" She shrank as the other girl came in, acting scared to death.

"Just something I wanted to ask. I heard—"

The word brought an audible gasp, and Freda turned and shot away, her livid face stricken. Eunice gaped incredulously.

"Say, wait! Say—" Something must really have happened to her!

She chased the pounding feet up the stairs and down the hall, catching the bedroom door and forcing her way in though Freda tried to fight her off:

"Get out—get away! . . . Lea' me alone—please, Eunice. Please! I don't want to see anyone."

"Then it's true!" Eunice still could hardly believe it. "Oh, let me in, Freda. Let me in. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

Freda's strength broke, and, crying open-mouthed, she ran to the bed and flung herself across it. Amazed, a bit frightened, immensely curious, Eunice closed the door, locked it, and skipped after her, kneeling opposite, trying to see her face. She was warmly excited.

"Then it's really so," she whispered, "what they're saying?"

"I don't know what they're saying. Whatever it is, it's not!"

"Who was it? Who was the boy? Aw, Freda, nothing exciting ever happens here! You can't leave me out. . . . What happened? Who was it?"

"I can't talk about it, Eunice. Leave me alone. Go away."

"Aw, honey, what's wrong?" Eunice climbed onto the bed and put an arm about the other girl. "We're friends, aren't we? Well, tell me about it!"

Freda tried to shake her off. "I can't. I won't—"

"Then you—did it! Well, gee, don't be ashamed! It's swell! I wish—Aw, come on, Freda—tell me about it! How'd it happen?"

"I do' know what you're talking about," Freda cried, words of protest flooding suddenly to her tongue. "I had too many drinks. It was awful! Mickey took me to the orchard and I— Oh, it was awful!"

"Mickey? Mickey Pratt? Geel" Eunice wriggled closer, her body

feverish now, her hands moist on Freda's bare arms, her breathing so heavy she had trouble talking. "Why was it—awful?" She swallowed. "Did it—hurt? . . . I've heard—"

To Freda the words were ugly but meaningless. She lay rigid, uncomfortably conscious of Eunice's moist, heated eagerness, of the begging voice damp in her ear:

"Aw, come on! Don't be mean. Tell me about it. Did he undress you? Did he—"

"Undress!" Here at last was a word which had reality. She choked. "Oh, no! . . . No!"

"But you have to—don't you? Aw, Freda, tell me! Were you scared? Are boys— When they get excited, do they— Oh, you know! . . . Huh?"

"Go away," Freda whispered. "Get away from me. I hate you! I don't know what you're talking about, but get away from me!"

Eunice drew back. "Gee, don't be like that! The other way around, I'd tell you."

"I don't know what you mean. I had too much to drink, and Mickey helped me to the orchard, and I was sick, and he took me home, and that's all! And I don't know what you're talking about—"

"Sick?" Eunice stared. "You mean—really? Gee, I thought—" She fell awkwardly silent. Presently, her blood cooling, she got uncertainly off the bed and stood looking down. "You mean—honestly!—you were sick? Is that *all*?"

"Yes. What did you think? What—"

Perhaps Eunice believed it the more readily because the other thing had been so unbelievable. She had never thought Freda had the nerve! "Well, gee, I'm sorry. I hope— Gosh! Allie said that, but—" She began backing toward the door. Then, impulsively: "Aw, Freda, I'm awful sorry! I hope I didn't say anything. . . . Look—if you hear anything about graduation, don't believe it. It ain't true."

A tear-stained face stared up at her. "Graduation?"

"Maybe you'll hear something about your speech—but don't believe it. Don't pay any attention!"

"What? What about my—my speech?"

"Darn it! . . . I didn't want to worry you. But—but you may hear—Ma's got a scheme— Oh, she's awful! She thinks you're—that you oughtn't to speak to the class, so she'll make you think the farm women'll hiss you if you try. But they won't, really. Don't believe her."

"Hiss me?" Freda repeated blankly. "Why? . . . Why, Eunice?"



"Just 'cause. But they won't, I'm telling you. Don't be scared."

"But they couldn't. They wouldn't dare! Not in front of the whole school. Why, it'd be—awful!"

Eunice unlocked the door and backed out quietly. Freda was certainly taking it hard. Had she really been sick—or was it just that she didn't want to tell about the other?

On her way out the girl turned off the gas in the kitchen, for she could smell something burning.

Finding supper unstarted, Swan frowned, but went methodically to the sink to wash. As the water began to run, feet scurried in the living room and seven-year-old Kit rushed out. "Daddy! Daddy! What's wrong with Freda? She's upstairs bawling and just hollers to go away when I say, How about supper. What's wrong, huh?"

"I don't know," Swan said. "But go back to the other room, and I'll find out."

He dried hands and face, not hurrying, climbed the back stairs, and walked down the hall to tap on his daughter's door. Almost before he could sit down beside her, she had scrambled into his arms, hiding her tear-streaked face against his chest. He could feel her trembling.

"Well," he said. "Well now, what's the trouble?"

"They're going to hiss me Friday if I speak!"

There was no expression on his Indian face, but his shoulders rose slightly, stiffening. "I doubt that!" he said grimly.

"But they are! Eunice said so. All the farm women. So I can't go. I can't speak. If they booed me in front of the school, I—I—"

"They won't," Swan said quietly. "Trust me."

"And I wanted to so much. I've planned on it all spring. And the speech is written. And it's good. And now I don't dare! Oh, daddy—"

"Now, Freda. Now, child"—caressingly—"you're going to give your speech. You're not going to let them scare you out."

"I can't. Not now. I just can't."

"I know how frightened you are. Believe me, I don't blame you. But you're going to speak. You have to. You've an obligation."

"Wha-what do you mean?"

He knew what he must say, but the unfamiliar words came awkwardly. "Your class— You're its best. It—and the school—have honored you by asking you to do this; and you can't let them down. More important—"

"Daddy, you don't mean—"

"Wait! More important still, you can't let yourself down. If you run now, you'll run all your life. Face it, and you may have life licked. Take their hissing if you must; it'll make them—not you—look silly."

She stared at him aghast. "But you wouldn't make me—"

"Yes, I would. You must. It's the only way."

"Oh, but, daddy, I can't! I'm afraid! What if— I don't dare, daddy."

"You'll be afraid of many things before you're as old as I am, Freda. The one way of meeting them is to walk up and thumb your nose—and the sooner you find that out, the better. So let's not argue. Let's say it's settled: you'll do what you have to do, go to graduation, and speak as you've planned."

"Oh, but, daddy, please—"

"It's settled," Swan said.

## XI

DICK FLEMHOS was late to work, and of course Charlie caught him. Charlie always caught him. The subsequent sarcasm aroused Dick's ugliest mood, and it expressed itself, as usual, in passive resistance which in some vague way hurt Charlie, he felt sure. Between the late start and the deliberate pace, he was last through, and the other boys drifted off home ahead of him, only one of them—Boo Fusek—pausing to ask, "Whassa matter, boy? Need help?" Only Boo ever offered him help, Dick thought blackly; and from Boo he would not take it.

He said, "Naw. Gwan home. I'll be over in a while."

Boo kicked at him and nodded. "O.K., boy. Be seein' yuh."

So he was left alone, in a black mood, with the drowsy animals.

This much was bad enough, but on top of it presently Charlie Dann came back from the upper barn and started in on his old tricks. Dick heard him pause up in the ell to admire Lucy Pride's new heifer calf and again in the feed room, where he muttered something violent and moved one of the sacks of feed. Then he entered the main barn, looked around and spotted Dick; and Dick would have sworn to the sudden satisfaction that lit his eyes.

Dann said, "Still here? . . . Well, when you finish your string, come and help me move the feed. We got some new coming in the morning—"

Dick stopped him. "Hey, wait a minute! I ain't moving no feed to-

night. I've worked longer now than the rest of the boys. Why should I get the dirty end of the stick all a time?"

"If you got it," Charlie growled, "it's 'cause you horsed around and are the last here. It's your own fault. I'll give you a hand—"

"I don't want any hand from you!"

"O.K., you won't get it. Move it alone."

"The hell I will! I'm moving no feed tonight—"

"Then don't come back in the morning."

Dick, feeling the triumph in the words, closed his mouth like a trap. They'd been wanting an excuse to fire him ever since he had started work here. Charlie hated him and was out to get him, but he wasn't going to. No, sir! Not till Dick was ready to leave. And then—

Then he'd get even before going.

Charlie turned on his heel and went out, and Dick spat after him, knowing his archenemy. The world might be against him, and the management of the dairy in particular, but it was Charlie who had been told off to get him. Yes, and he'd tried hard, for there was a personal hatred involved.

Dick finished his string slowly, not venting his fury on the cows, because he liked animals. They were his own kind; they, too, got the short end from the world. They were told what to eat, when to procreate, how much to produce, and if they didn't measure up they were sold to the butcher. Men of his sort, Dick often thought, were like them. They took what they were given and did what they were told, and if they complained they were kicked out.

He knew Charlie was stalking him.

Finishing his string, he went to move the feed. If he didn't, they would win, and though he hated his job, he meant to choose the time and way of his going. If he left now, Boo might not come with him.

Boo was his friend, a good guy, always laughing and kidding, always ready to help. Dick didn't get on with most people; but with Boo it was different—though, try as he would, he couldn't make him see that Charlie was out to get the two of them. Boo was the kind who never believed bad of people till it was too late. Boo was quite a guy, to Dick, even if he didn't understand him.

By the time the feed was stacked, it had begun to rain outside, and Flemhos hesitated bleakly under shelter, a short, cylindrical figure, head hunched, long arms dangling, knowing it was a long walk to the other side of the farm and that he would get soaked. In the end he decided not to go, and felt his way in the dark back down the main aisle be-

tween the stanchions until he was under the trap leading to the mow; there, leaping, he caught its edges and pulled himself up by main strength.

The nearly empty loft was warm, dry, and smelled of old hay. The big door at its end was lowered a few feet at the top, and through the gap streamed light from a street lamp on the drive, making a yellow pattern across the high arched roof, the intricately pieced rafters, the steel track where the grapple ran. Reflected, it illumined the whole mow faintly.

His feet hollow on the planking, Dick crossed toward the few tons of pale yellow hay which were left stacked in the back end of the barn, and settled himself into it, letting his dark mood cool in the dry sweet warmth. The hayloft was one of the compensations of working here, and this was not the first night he had spent listening to the rain's soothing mutter on its roof.

He only wished Boo were with him.

His mind drifted, waiting for sleep which did not come, and gradually, imperceptibly, depression invaded him, bringing thoughts about the hopelessness of life and the peace that death might be. The idea of death had always excited him. It would mean the end of struggle and of persecution. It would also mean victory for "them." It was they who put thoughts such as these into his head when he was low, and it was only because he knew they wanted him to kill himself that he fought the yearning to do so. Sometimes he had a wild desire to kill them instead. He might have done this, for, short as he was, his arms were powerful, his chest barrel-like, his stomach corded. He could have broken Charlie across his knee, but knew he mustn't, because then they'd have him. They would lock him up, and Dick had been locked up before, in the orphanage to which he had been taken after his prostitute mother had died. Once was enough. He would not be caught again, he told himself; he would be careful. He would fool them. He would find a way that could never be traced to him before settling his debt of hate against the world.

And what a debt it was!

He lay sweating, thinking about it: about his mother's hate; about how other children had thrown the name "bastard" at him as long as he could remember, a name he had resented furiously even before understanding what it meant; about the orphanage—

Aaaah! What the hell!

It might take time, but the day would come.

He sat up, fumbling in the semidark for his cigarettes. Finding them,

he put one between his lips and struck a match. In the vault of the haymow the tiny flame was immense, pushing his shadow monstrously against wall and roof. High overhead, each rafter had its own wavering shadow as though the place were on fire.

The thought caught and held him: Let him but flick this match away and, in spite of the rain drumming on the roof . . .

He squatted, black eyes wide over the match flame, small short-lipped mouth agape with excitement.

Should he? Could it be traced back to him? Was this *the way*?

The match burned his fingers, and he dropped it.

It fell, still alight, on the edge of the stack.

Dick watched the flame flicker, fail, spurt again. It was fascinating. It almost died, but before it did one final flare touched a straw and clutched it. The straw curled, crumbling as the tiny flame crept down its length. If it went far enough there were other straws. The hand of God was in it, Dick thought: if it reached them, that wouldn't be his fault; it would be fate. Excitement and suspense fought in him for exultant expression.

The flame reached new fuel, caught, grew brighter, and Dick wanted to shout.

And then, downstairs, a cow lowed sleepily.

The sound caught his attention, and his thoughts spun.

Suddenly he leapt to his feet, stamped on the spreading fire. Sparks flew, but the flames vanished. He pursued the sparks, crushing them one by one till the last was dead.

Dazed, he stared at the dark patch on the edge of the yellow hay.

Jesus! He had nearly burned the cows.

Perspiration covered him, and he began trembling violently.

## XII

SWAN ELLIS sucked at his pipe, but it was dead. Outside the boys were shouting in the cool of the evening, but in the house it was quiet. Very quiet. He kept listening, but there was no sound of movement at all.

A muscle played impatiently at the corner of his jaw. What was she doing? She had scarcely eaten, for on the cluttered table her chop, baked potato, and cole slaw, the baked apple which was to have been

her dessert, all stood untouched. And when the others had finished she had disappeared upstairs, instead of clearing the dining room.

To dress? Perhaps, but there was no sound.

Swan hitched his chair back and crossed his legs the other way.

It was after seven, and the exercises started at eight. He himself had bathed and dressed since dinner, and now waited uncomfortably in his stiff collar and best suit, suspecting his daughter of dawdling up there in the hope of its getting so late she might not have to go. That was how children figured things.

She would go, though—late or on time!—for she must learn to face life. On this point, consideration had only confirmed his first instinct.

Swan knew from experience what it was to be afraid, and what it cost to challenge fear; he also knew how imagination magnified anything dreaded till its reality, when met, could be nothing but anticlimax; and this Freda too must learn, by force if necessary. That what she feared would not develop, he was sure. Doubly sure, for it was far beyond what even the farm women would dare, and besides he had spoken to both Adrian and Steve. There would be no trouble, but even if there should be it could only (as he had said) make the hecklers themselves look silly. And this also Freda must come to realize.

No, she must not be allowed to run from imagined catastrophe, or she would be running all her life. So Swan, whose integrity and courage were soul-deep, believed. If doubt of his course remained, it was too vague to put a finger on.

When it was seven-fifteen, he rose and went upstairs, pausing at Freda's door to listen. There was no sound, so he rapped and went in.

She was at her dressing table, staring at the mirror dry-eyed and motionless; and at sight of him her lips took on a stubbornness that was like his own while a slow flush of anger and defiance mounted her throat.

"You should be dressed," he said. "You'll be late."

"I'm not going."

"Better get out of that dress and into your new one."

"I can't go, daddy."

"You're going, Freda, if we have to walk in, in the middle of the program."

"I—I won't!"

"It's a long time since anyone's said that to me."

"I mean it."

Revolt was so rare in his experience that he was briefly silent in astonishment. "Don't make me use force. I—"

"I don't care what you use."

"Freda, your mother disciplined you when she was alive, and it's not been necessary since, so I've never raised my hand to you in all your life. But, if I must, I'll teach you obedience as I've taught the boys—with a hairbrush."

He wondered what he would do if she dared him still—and for a moment, face flaming and furious, she seemed about to do so. Then, as his hand moved toward the dresser, her lips trembled and her eyes filled.

"Uh-uh, don't. I'll— Aw, daddy, *please* don't make me go! Don't you see I can't? I'm scared. If anything happened—in front of the whole school—I'd—I'd simply curl up." The words came thinly and with such difficulty that he let her talk, thinking they would drain off quickly in defeat. Instead, her pleading grew and intensified.

"Quit it," he ordered finally. "Stop it, Freda."

But there was no stopping it. Pleading became begging, and the begging abject. Her voice wailed at him, tears standing on her streaked face. "I'll do anything, daddy, anything. Spank me. Do anything you want, only don't make me go!"

"This won't get you anything, Freda. Quit it."

She couldn't. She was gradually losing control, and her talk became wild. Her face flushed and contorted, and she beat on the dressing table with her fists, her voice shrill as she shouted at him, not begging now but protesting, accusing, gasping things that stung and tore. She was going to pieces before his eyes, crying out incoherently, passionately, between shuddering breaths that racked her whole body and threatened to turn into wild sobbing laughs. Her swollen, crimson face was hardly recognizable, and the gusty sounds from her gaping mouth were no longer words. Crazy laughter that she could not stop convulsed her body again and again.

Swan's skin prickled, and dismay paralyzed him. Finally he grasped her shoulders and shook her fiercely. "Stop it! Do you hear me, Freda? Shut up, or I'll give you something to cry for."

She could not stop.

He reached for the hairbrush and tossed it to the bed. "I've had enough. Come over here. . . . Freda, do you hear me?"

He repeated the command, but it did not register. She did not hear him. He hesitated, hating the indignity of force yet knowing this must

be stopped, and then he stepped toward her. Arms and hands flailed at him. Avoiding them, he tangled his fingers into the bright gold of her hair and twisted her screaming off the bench onto her knees. Keeping his hold, he grasped the clothes in the small of her back with his free hand, lifted her to her feet and propelled her toward the bed.

She tried to twist away, fighting and kicking, but he flung her face down on the spread, set one knee on her back as she struggled to turn over, and reached for the brush. The flat of it whacked down with a crack like breaking wood, and Freda gasped, stopped screaming, and went rigid in anticipation of more.

But that was all. He held her a moment to be sure her hysteria was over, then freed her and stood up, sweating. Freda shrank from him till the headboard stopped her, and she looked utterly incredulous. After a moment she buried her head and began to cry.

Swan was ashamed, not of the blow, which had been necessary, but of the scuffling that had preceded it. That had gone bitterly against the grain. "I'm sorry, Freda. You were—wild. I had to do something. . . . Now get dressed, please—"

"Don't make me go! I can't. I can't. I can't!"

After her defiance, nothing would have changed his mind. "You can and will. A week ago you wheedled and wept, and against my better judgment I let you go to that party. If you'd stayed home, you wouldn't be in trouble now, so this time we'll abide by my decision—tears or no tears!"

"Oh, but, daddy—"

"I won't let you run from your imagination. . . . Now it's 7:22. I'll be back at a quarter of eight, and if you're not ready you'll go as you are. You may be still in those clothes looking like the wrath of God from crying, or you may be stark naked in the bathtub, but you'll go as I find you. There'll be no argument."

He turned on his heel and went out. He had quit fooling, and Freda knew it. He meant every word of this.

Swan had never seen the school parking lot so full. A slow line of cars moved up the drive ahead of him and shuffled sullenly into ranks at the direction of an impatient policeman. As his own halted, he said, "Watch out for the fellow next to us, now."

Carroll, on the verge of flinging himself out in the other car's path,



cried: "Aw, we see him. We see him. On'y we're late. We gotta hurry. See: the clock's striking. It's eight now."

"They can't start without Freda," Kit objected.

"They can too. They wouldn't wait for anybody."

Swan got out, opening the door for them. "Don't run," he said. "Don't get in the way of cars."

But the boys started helter-skelter for the school, dodging through the people who were streaming across the grounds. Swan had not realized there would be so many. He recognized several men he had done business with, others who were prominent in the city. Good Lord, did they all have kids graduating?

He circled the car to open Freda's door, but she sat unmoving. He said, "Come—we're late," and she gathered her skirts quietly and got out.

All the way down she had sat silently rigid, eyes to the front, head high, her chilled pale face as impassive as his own. Swan hardly knew what to think. She had come downstairs just as he had been ready to go for her, looking ghost-white, fragile and utterly lovely in her new dress. There had been no trace of tears or temper, and save for her frigid calm, well covered by the boys' chatter, there had been no reminder of previous ugliness. A sullen resignation seemed to possess her, and Swan was satisfied. If it held, she would get through all right.

They crossed the parking space and followed the cement walk to the front entrance, where the crowd funneled together and slowed down.

A large gentleman said, "Bless me if it isn't Swan Ellis. And all dressed up! How's the farm problem, Swan?"

"Not helped by the high price of fertilizer, Bill."

"Now it ain't me makes the prices, you know. I have to charge what I do to stay in business. . . . This your daughter?"

"Freda, this is Bill Carmody—"

"How do you do?" Freda said.

"Lord, Swan, how'd you ever father such a beauty? She graduating?"

"She's—one of the speakers." It was surprisingly hard to say though he should have been proud of it.

"Well, fine, fine! How do you feel, young lady? Nervous?"

Freda made no answer, so Swan said: "She does, a little. Come, Freda, we'll find the boys. Glad to 've seen you, Bill."

Sweat was icy on his face and shoulders as he walked away. He hadn't imagined Bill Carmody and the rest would all be here.

Freda seemed calm enough. When fear passed a certain point and

escape was hopeless, you grew numb. Let her stay so, he prayed, till this was over.

The boys were waiting at the main door. "Come on! Come on, we're late! There won't be any seats left."

Swan held it for Freda, and she went in, followed by Kit and Carroll. Willie lingered to say: "Hey, she looks swell, huh? She's got on that snooty look like a queen. She'll lay 'em in the aisles!"

Swan should have been amused and proud, but was merely impatient.

They went up the inside stairs, and in the upper hall met Allie Ochs standing with Larry and Blanche. Swan's jaw firmed instinctively.

Larry, unshaven and with a brown stain of tobacco at the corner of his soft red mouth, cried: "Lookit! Here's Freda. Hey, Freda, some teacher's lookin' fer yuh. You're late. I thought y' mightn't be coming and told her so." He accented it with a wide grin.

The girl was not as numb as Swan had hoped. The crack went home, and she flushed painfully. Swan's jaws ached with futile strain.

Mrs. Ochs said: "Now don't plague the girl, Larry. Steve don't want you to, and you better stay on his good side, no matter what you think." She bent forward to pat Freda's hand. "Don't worry, dear. Things are never so bad, I always say, that they can't be worse."

And Larry leered slyly. "Want a drink to buck you up, huh?"

Swan, burning with helpless fury, took Freda's arm and steered her away. He was angry and shaken. If, after Steve's promise, Allie had ventured such backhanded digs, and if, in Swan's very presence, Larry had said what he had, perhaps—

Perhaps hissing was no such remote possibility as he had thought.

He wanted to reassure Freda, but there were no words.

Halfway down the hall a harried-looking woman rushed up to them. "Oh, Freda, where have you been? We couldn't *think!*"

"Sorry we're late," Swan said. "It couldn't be helped."

"Well, we're all a little late. Is this your father, dear?"

"Miss Vineta," Freda murmured. Her head was up again, but her chill calm was gone. She looked ravaged and far less lovely.

"We're so glad to meet parents," Miss Vineta gushed. "Your daughter's so brilliant, Mr. Ellis, and she's going to make such a splendid speech. The mayor will be on the platform with you, Freda dear. Won't that be lovely? There are a lot of important people here. You're not nervous, are you? That's a lovely dress. What a shame to cover it up! But you'd better put this on. I've been carrying it around for you."

She had a mortarboard and a gray gown. Freda let herself be helped into them, and they made her look surprisingly mature.

"No," Miss Vineta said, "the tassel goes on that side. When you get your diploma, you put it on the other. Remember? We'd better go in. Everybody's going in. Come, dear. Don't be afraid."

They reached the auditorium, and Freda halted in the doorway, turning back to Swan, her face expressionless but her eyes begging.

And Swan hesitated, understanding and wondering.

Miss Vineta, finding she had lost her charge again, was hurrying back, bucking the tide. "Oh, Freda, do come! Mr. Judson's just waiting for people to find seats. Oh, you wanted to talk to your father! . . . Well, hurry. Do hurry."

Freda looked at Swan, but the moment had passed. There was a barrier between them of a blow and of complete misunderstanding. Her lips quivered, and for an instant she leaned against the door jamb, trembling.

Miss Vineta whispered: "Oh, dear, what's the matter? I do hope she isn't sick! Come dear. Don't be afraid. You'll make a lovely speech."

Faces foamed about Swan as he followed them in, and he seemed to be the focus of all eyes as he stood just inside the door. He was out of his element here and felt hollow and self-conscious.

Freda was climbing the steps to the platform, where Mr. Judson, the principal, was looking at her as he might have looked at a tardy pupil. Everyone on the platform was looking at her, and everyone in the hall too. Her uncertain feet caught the edge of the top step and she almost stumbled. There was a whispered gasp, a quick sound of fright and pity from the parents, an involuntary titter from the younger people, and then silence while everyone watched Freda find her seat and sit down.

Swan located the boys, who had saved a seat for him, and moved up the aisle toward them, mopping his face with a handkerchief.

"What happened?" Kit asked. "Did she trip?"

"I'll tan you if you ever speak of it," Swan said. "She's just nervous in front of these people."

And, Lord, how many there were!

The place was packed. Up front were the seniors in their high-school-gray caps and gowns, their mortarboards making an uneven pattern like a choppy sea. Girls were seated on one side of the aisle, boys on the other. Behind them were the other students. Next, and jamming the galleries, were parents and friends—hundreds of them.

Swan was surprised at how many he recognized. He spotted a dozen, twenty, without trying. Men he knew. And more than twenty! The more he looked, the more he saw. Everybody was there. And, he thought suddenly, if there were twenty he knew, there must be hundreds that Freda knew.

If anything happened to her in front of them all—

Across the room he saw Ida Heim, Kate Cooper, and Luella Walsh, and it was a shock. He had expected Ida, of course; the Heims were here to watch Eunice graduate. But what of the other two who had no children?

His uneasiness increased.

His eyes went to the platform. Mr. Judson, standing center, was focus of a concave double line of chairs. The mayor was indeed there, and the school officers and the important members of the faculty.

Yes, and the student speakers.

He picked out Freda, and she looked calm enough at this distance. Few in the audience could have guessed she was not.

Swan loosened the collar that had grown tight about his throat.

Mr. Judson introduced a minister who gave the blessing. He did it thoroughly, and Swan squirmed, waiting for the end yet wishing it would never come. When it did, the school, by odd coincidence, sang a hymn of thanksgiving and settled gratefully in their seats.

Mr. Judson then introduced the young lady who had written the class song and the boy who had furnished the lyrics, and the latter led the class in singing it, finishing to a storm of applause.

Swan's eyes sought Ida restlessly and found her leaning forward, talking to Mrs. Cooper in the row ahead.

They wouldn't dare! he thought. They wouldn't dare.

A girl got up to read the class poem, and again the audience applauded vigorously. They were applauding anything and everything, he knew, but the kids on the stage would be taking it seriously. They would applaud Freda too—perhaps.

If they were given a chance.

Ida wouldn't dare, he thought again; she hadn't the nerve.

A lank youth began reading the class history. It meant little to the parents, but the graduates found parts of it pretty funny and gave the boy an extra hand when he departed.

And on the other side of the hall, Ida and Kate still whispered.

Swan located Allie and Blanche farther back, and Mrs. Ihloff's face popped out of the crowd closer to. He mopped his forehead again. The

whole damned bunch of them! God damn them to hell, they were going to do it!

Yes, and whatever happened would be his fault. He had forced Freda into this—literally. He had asked her to react as a middle-aged man would, and she was only a child. It was so long since he had been sixteen that he had forgotten it was not a period of moral courage, even for a boy. That came later. At sixteen you were sensitive: you felt too keenly to be ruled by the logic of strength.

He had forgotten too that the capacity to "face things" rose from inside or not at all. If Freda had not yet developed it, it could not be forced on her by making her climb a platform and take what was coming. That was less likely to strengthen her, he saw now, than to tear her to pieces.

But he had realized it too late, and it was out of his hands.

Poor damned kid, sitting there with the notables! In a few moments she must rise and face all these people and accept whatever happened—because he had ordered it. Whatever came, and what it did to her, must be his burden.

Swan groaned, and his imagination ran wild, picturing the critical moments. Freda must be seeing the same nightmares, must have been seeing them constantly for the last forty-eight hours, he realized suddenly. For perhaps the first time, he had a real inkling of what the girl had gone through, of what she was going through now as she sat so quietly, so remotely yonder.

Kit whispered, "What's the matter, pa? Sick?"

Mr. Judson was speaking again, and for an instant seemed actually to be introducing her. ". . . one of our brilliant students," he said, "whose marks average 96.3 for his four-year course."

Swan caught the pronoun and relaxed. The principal was referring fulsomely to the Schaffer boy, number-two student of the class, and he was saving only his ultimate compliments for Freda.

His ultimate compliments—after which . . .

Swan closed his mind to it, for there was nothing he could do.

Presently Schaffer came forward, a short, waddling boy with a good-natured look and considerable presence. Confidently, he addressed "Mr. Mayor, Mr. Judson, Officers of the School, Faculty, Fellow Seniors, Students, Parents, and Friends":

"Soon," he said, "you will hear from a real scholar. Mr. Judson wasted a lot of good adjectives on me, and in case he hasn't any left I'll tell you that they're saving the best for last. I'm merely doing the

spadework for the main attraction of the evening, the beautiful and brilliant Miss Freda Ellis, valedictorian of our class."

There was a shower of applause and friendly laughter.

Swan was proud, but knew that every word of praise, every bit of build-up, gave Freda the farther to fall.

At least the farm women had not reacted to her name. A good sign, perhaps. Or perhaps they had merely been caught unprepared.

Young Schaffer set to work on a painstaking, prosaic, workmanlike study of the history of social legislation. It would be Freda's task to sketch against this background the problems, the larger purposes, and the future of the subject.

Swan could not listen, for he dreaded the moment when the droning voice would cease, and feared to follow the argument lest he see its end too soon. He kept shifting restlessly, turning to watch the farm women, trying to read their faces.

He was studying Ida Heim's when it happened.

Ernie Schaffer's voice faltered, broke in mid-sentence, and stopped. Simultaneously a ripple of surprise ran through the audience, and Swan's eyes snapped back to the stage. Nothing seemed to be happening there, at all, however, and for the fraction of a second that it took him to think "What the hell?" he failed to see that Freda's chair was vacant.

She was already down the steps, crossing toward the auditorium doorway. She looked all right. Her head was up, her face expressionless, her walk unhurried. She might have been going out for a glass of water, but she wasn't; she was running away, and the audience, seeming to sense it, was silent as she disappeared. The gap seemed to last minutes, and in it the sound of retreating feet was clearly audible, walking at first, then running, then breaking into panic flight as the sounds diminished down the hall.

Mr. Judson motioned, and Miss Vineta jumped and fled in pursuit. The principal gestured again and Schaffer gulped, "Uh—ah—where was I?"—stumbling incoherently ahead with his speech.

He went unheard in the sudden gust of movement and whispering as people leaned forward, back, across, to speak to neighbors.

"Gee, what happened?" Willie said.

But Swan was pushing out between the seats toward the side aisle, conscious that his every step was watched.

He found no one in the upper corridor and went downstairs, meeting Miss Vineta as she came in from outside.

"Oh!" the teacher gasped. "Oh, Mr. Ellis, what can be wrong? Oh

dear! I heard her go out, but I can't find her, and I'm afraid she's ill. She looked ill. What had we better do? Look for her, do you think? It's so dark out. You'll help, won't you? I'm—I'm so nervous."

"We won't find her around here," Swan said.

"Oh, dear, what will Mr. Judson say?"

Swan asked for paper and pencil and wrote a note. "Get this to Mr. Larry Ochs," he said.

"But I don't know him! How could I possibly find him in this—"

"Try," Swan said. "I want him to take my boys home."

He waited for no objections. He disliked asking favors of Larry, hated leaving the boys stranded here, but neither was important now when he had to find Freda.

After what had passed between them this evening, he could be small help or comfort, he supposed. She might even shrink from him.

Still, he must try.

### XIII

LEW BARCHI took his beer off the bar and led Steve to a corner table well away from anyone else. Ochs asked, "What's on your mind?"

"Siddown, Steve. Look! The boys are fed up. We stood all the long hours and dirty deals we're gonna. We're through."

"Yeah?"

"We're ready to do something. We're gonna strike."

"You and how many more?"

"Most of us."

Steve grunted. "Who?"

"Me. The Chief. This new guy, Roane. Most of us."

"Uh-huh." The white teeth grinned in the dark face. "When?"

"When we're ready. We ain't got that far. Point is, the plant could come in on the pickings—if it wanted to."

Steve gulped beer and wiped his mouth. "How do we rate that?"

"We-ell, we might need a little help, see? I figure if both departments walked out, we'd have 'em cold."

Ochs grunted again. "And if the plant went, your drivers 'd be on strike whether they wanted to be or not."

"That ain't the idea," Lew protested. Then he changed his tack.

Making marks on the table with the wet bottom of his glass, he said, "Look, Steve, you're part right. Some of the boys are scared, sure. But if the plant threw in with us, they could be talked around. And if not, what could they do? If there wasn't nothin' to deliver, they couldn't work, could they? They'd hafta strike."

"I can smell my plant holding the bag," Steve said.

"You know me, Steve. That wouldn't happen."

"Yeah? And what if my boys don't want to strike?"

"I guess they would if you said to."

Steve shrugged. "I don't like the sound of it."

"Think it over anyway. I still gotta work some on my end."

Steve didn't say, "I bet!" but he looked it. He said nothing for a moment; then, with narrowed eyes: "If I did think it over—what is there in it for me?"

Barchi licked his lips, and his eyes fell.

## XIV

"I get fed up with this place," Ed Thomas said. He stood at the window, glowering at the flat expanse of dairy. "These damned women," he growled. "Suppose you've heard about Freda Ellis?"

"Freda?" Clint said. "Why, beyond what I told you last week—"

"No, no. This is new. I thought, living at Ida Heim's—"

"She doesn't talk about such things before the girls."

"Well, they had a demonstration cooked up for her graduation last night. Didn't think her fit to talk to their kids, or something. Or Freda thought they had."

Clint frowned. The two of them were alone in the office, for it was late on Saturday afternoon, and Ed, looking tired and disgusted, was volunteering the information as though, Clint thought, it were something on his mind which he had to get rid of to somebody.

"Naturally Freda didn't want to go, but Swan made her. So last night, in the middle of the program, she funk'd it: walked off the platform and out of the hall. Cold feet. . . . But now they're saying it proves what they said about her."

Clint made an inadequate sound, but the resentment against Ida which he had entertained a week ago was rising again.



The manager said, "I've heard it a dozen times in the past hour. First they said Freda's guilty conscience wouldn't let her face that hall full of decent women and innocent children—ha!—but then Swan got busy telling people Freda knew what was planned and simply panicked. So now they say if she couldn't face her friends and neighbors, it must be for a reason! The whole farm's talking, and the story's growing. . . . And what can you do? . . . It's these dirty-minded sluttish damned women—"

Clint said, "I guess the men are doing their share—"

But Ed snapped sharply, "It's the women who stirred it up. Last week the men only listened and grinned, taking it with a lot of salt, but now they're wondering if the poor girl's running away doesn't prove everything. So the story's started and 'll run its course, and I, at least, know who to blame for it. This world would be a better place without females."

"There speaks the bachelor," Clint said, but a shade grimly.

"There speaks a man who has been confined on Weyland Meadows Dairy with the ugliest of the sex," Thomas retorted. "This couldn't have happened anywhere but here, I swear. The place is—is degenerate! It's mentally—morally—inbred. It's a tiny world become focused on itself; and for the people here the horizons have closed down until this dairy is their life, their job, their all. It's a family living apart from the normal world and subsisting on a morbid but hopeful interest in its own incestuous intimacies!"

Clint could only stare. Ed's freckled face was flushed, his protuberant eyes were hot, and a trace of froth flecked the corners of his mouth. He spoke explosively, as though feelings long repressed were bubbling irresistibly to the surface.

"D'you know how many newspapers reach this farm?" he demanded. "Three. My own *New York Times*. Swan Ellis's local. Ben Goetz's tabloid. That's the lot—for eleven houses and forty-five or fifty people. Yes, there's the radio, I know; and people do have some vague outline of current events—but just ask them their significance, and you'll see what I mean. They don't know—basically—what's going on. And don't care. City news, national, international means little to them.

"But let someone have a baby or a birthday, let people spat, mention rents, houses, wages— My God! And there's no such thing as privacy. A girl can have a delayed period, and—so help me Hannah!—everyone on the place is speculating. The dairy, the people they know, the asinine little things they do, the uninteresting, unimportant trivia of

their own and everybody else's lives—those things fill their minds, their mouths, their time, to the exclusion of everything else. You'd think they'd rise above it sometimes, but they don't!"

Clint was reminded of Wharton Pettitt and what the bookkeeper had told him on his very first day here, and he was not happy. He told himself that some hidden bitterness was making Ed exaggerate, that many—perhaps most—industrial communities built around a particular business would be, to some extent, inbred in this same sense; but still—considering he had tied his fortunes to the dairy's—he disliked the sound of it.

"It's unhealthy," Thomas said. "Morbid. Like thinking about yourself too much. It narrows the mind till there's no proportion or perspective. Take the department heads. I remember Wycoff saying when I first came: 'Don't trust them. They're jealous, ambitious.' Well, I didn't believe him. I saw they were good, that each worked hard in his own department; and if there were rivalries, I thought, it would make for efficiency. It didn't. They're a team of horses, all pulling hard but in different directions. You can't imagine their childish feuds and squabbles. Some of them actually don't speak to each other."

"I know," Clint said. "I've seen that much for myself."

"And why? Because each is trying to beat the others out for the job that I've got. Oh, we all grind our own axes, I know, but in a place like this—" He shook his head. "You see the other fellow grinding his, so you grind yours harder and take an occasional swipe at his throat to test the edge. Soon your petty rivalries narrow your life till you can't see that your personal success is dependent on the success of the business, and that that depends on your cooperation with your fellows and your bosses. People here don't care about the business. I believe they hate it. They don't see what it might be, but only gripe about what it is. They've no perspective. They can't see any larger outline, any ultimate aim. They can't see beyond their noses!"

Ed was well started. No doubt he usually used Wharton Pettitt for a safety valve, but today, when news about Freda exploded his temper, he had had to turn to Clint.

Not a very discreet procedure.

Clint might have stopped him. He could have said it was five o'clock and begged off to go home, but he didn't. He was interested and disturbed.

Thomas said: "The narrowness of outlook goes right down to the men. Intelligence, of course; they're a cheap lot. But, reading the pro-

labor literature these days, you get the idea that even cheap laborers have brains—of a sort, anyway. Perhaps these aren't typical—a particularly moronic bunch—or perhaps there are special circumstances; but you'd think, wouldn't you, that they'd get above sex, housekeeping, and complaints once in a while? see that loyalty to the dairy, working hard for it, would net them more personally than petty throat-cutting? Well, they don't. That's partly why I get so fed up."

He was certainly fed up. He dwelt on the men for a while and then returned to the department heads, who seemed to be his pet peeve, castigating them in general and then specifically:

"Take Steve," he said. "He knows milk and plants. He knows short cuts and how to handle men. He's good. You never have to worry about his getting the milk out on time. Every day. But what I put up with! He has one brother in the plant, another in the barns, and his boy Duke works summers in the ice-cream room. Nepotism—sure. And we buy the supplies we do because there's something in it for him. I know that! even if the creamery is so well under his thumb that the office knows damn little about what goes on down there. . . . It's a game with him to see what he can get away with."

He took Steve apart with the anger of a man who knows he is being hoodwinked and can do nothing. Presently he went on to some of the others, though Clint remembered only fragments later:

"Or there's Charlie Dann. Great on breeding, feeding, milk production, but resentful of today's bath-and-bright-light kind of cleanliness. Won't have the advertising department 'making a side-show' of his end of the business. . . . Queer duck. . . . Took a vacation in New York about ten years back and came home married. To a chorus girl. God knows how it happened!

"And there's Swan Ellis, who has to be handled like radium. . . . He's broader, shrewder, more honest than the rest—but try messing around in his department if you want to learn about temperament. . . . Sometimes I think he lets me run this place on sufferance. We trust him thoroughly, though, and he's one of the two who might have a chance of inheriting my job if I left."

"The other would be Pettitt?" Clint said.

"Who thinks he should be manager now, yes. He used to have Carly's job and, when the bookkeeping position fell vacant, thought he deserved to move up. Instead Mr. Wycoff brought me in, and in due course I got to be manager. Whart resents that. He's jealous, and contemptuous of the way I handle things. I'm not quick enough or strong enough for him.

He likes to make his snap decisions, then sit back and smirk at me. And he's right in them more often than I like to think. More often than I am." Whart had a definite business philosophy, tough, shrewd, honest. For one thing, he had no use for employees. "You may think I haven't; but that's disappointment in their capacities, while Whart simply thinks they haven't any. He won't coddle them, and says I'm playing with fire—labor trouble, he means—if I don't sack them out of hand at their slightest complaint . . ."

Currents and undercurrents, Clint thought. Or was it only an inevitable and natural divergence of views among individuals?

Ed was starting in on Red Walsh; but Clint had heard enough and began pointedly to put things away in his desk.

Standing hopefully nude, Ben Goetz was waiting for the water to run hot in the tub. Nakedness seemed to accentuate the slope of his scrawny shoulders and the forward thrust of his sharp-featured head, and it revealed painfully how his bones stood in ridges under his skin of fish-belly white. The glasses perched on his beak of a nose looked oddly out of place.

The long muscles danced in his thighs, and he called, "Say, hon, what's the matter with the water? It don't run hot."

"Oh, dear!" Sonia said. "The heater's been on all day, I guess."

"Oh! I thought you lighted it after supper."

The heater was an odd one. It worked admirably for the first hour or two after being lighted, but then, though it continued burning, the water in the tank would gradually cool. There was no explanation, and Red Walsh merely scoffed at the story; but it was a fact. Here the heater had been going all day, yet the water came barely lukewarm.

The farm ought to do something about it, Ben thought vaguely; after all, he paid rent. But there were so many things the farm should have done something about: the painting, the repairing, the furnace.

He sighed and, putting his glasses on the laundry basket, stepped gingerly into the tepid tub. There was no relaxing in it, and in spite of scrubbing vigorously to warm himself, he was quickly chilled. He splashed out in record time, shaking violently, and reached for his glasses and a towel with the same movement.

There was small satisfaction in such a bath, he thought, disappointed and disgruntled. Damn the farm and its houses!

Back in the bedroom, still shaking, he found the light out and Sonia abed. His glasses went methodically onto the bureau, his dressing gown

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onto the bed's foot, and he sank gratefully down where the blankets were turned back. Swinging up his feet, he pulled the covers over him, hunched them around his throat, and drew in his knees to conserve warmth. Even so, it would take minutes to warm him through; his thin body absorbed cold and held it.

Teeth chattering, he said, "I gotta tell Ed about that heater again."

Sonia did not answer. As his shivering lessened, Ben relaxed and let weariness seep into him. He had slept intermittently since mid-afternoon, but was still tired. It seemed to him he was always tired.

"Ben—"

"Uh?"

"I heard something nasty today. About Freda Ellis. Have you—"

"Uh. Heard it Saturday." He mumbled it, but she understood him and was justifiably annoyed. This was Tuesday night, and while she had as little to do with the farm women and their gossip as she could, she was as curious as the next woman and wanted Ben to keep her posted.

But she passed it up. "I'm as mad as hops," she said. "It's a rotten story, and you could just look at Freda and know it's not true! But this place— Oh, I get so mad at it!"

"Boys figger it's so," Ben muttered. "Where there's smoke—"

"That's idiotic. It started in the minds of some sex-crazy women, and everybody's repeated it till— Oh, Ben, it's an awful place! People aren't happy here; that's why they do things like this. . . . Ben, let's get out."

"Uh." He was enjoying the sensuous pleasures of lassitude.

"Ben, you're not listening. I mean it. Let's pack and leave. Let's go somewhere where we've a chance!"

"Ah!" Ben said. "Nice if we could."

"We can!" Sonia flopped over to face his sagging back. "All we have to do is go. Ben, listen: let's give notice tomorrow. We'd be out of here in two weeks. Darling, why not?"

Ben grunted. She pushed him in the small of the back, and he gasped, choked, and came sharply to one elbow, coughing. He snarled:

"What the hell! What's the matter? What you do that for?"

"Ben, I'm talking to you. Let's get out of Weyland Meadows—"

"Oh, this blasted Ellis story—"

"It isn't just that. I'm thinking of you, Ben. Of me. We're in a rut. We're in with a lot of people who are going nowhere and know it—and aren't happy about it! That's what's wrong with them."

"Yeah?" Ben said. "Thought you'd said a hundred times the farm was growing? That it'd be a big dairy some day."

Sonia had faith enough in the farm's destiny, but saw no place in it for Ben, which was a hard thing to say. "Ben, what future do you expect, staying here? You'll be a milkman all your life. Is that all you want? Is it, Ben?"

"Maybe I'll be relief man some day."

"Relief man! Oh, Ben, what an ambition! You want more than that, don't you?"

He settled himself on his face without answering.

"Don't you, Ben?"

"I don't kid myself that I'll be that, even. I haven't the strength or the drive, hon. If I had, I'd still lack the ability. As a milkman I sneak by. I've always sneaked by. All my life. At college, at every job I've had, in everything I've done. I guess, if I were a ditch digger, I'd sneak by at that, too."

"Stop it! You're simply reveling in self-pity."

"I guess I sneak by as a husband too."

"Ben—honestly!—I hate you when you talk like that."

"It's the truth. . . . Sonia, I'm earning a living here. Suppose I gave it up: what would become of us? I might not find another job. Even if I did, it would be at far less salary, and we'd be years getting back to our present level. And I'd get no farther in another business than I will in this. You know that."

"I don't. I don't at all! This is a morbid, unhealthy place, and in a different atmosphere— And if you couldn't find a new job, I could."

Ben snapped, "I'll support my own wife, thanks."

"But, Ben, it's so foolish! I need something to do."

"As long as you're my wife, it won't be work."

The "as long as," which she did not stress by repetition, gave Sonia a hollow feeling. The words had slipped out unnoticed, and if she spoke of them he would only say he hadn't meant them like that. But she was sick at heart.

She blurted: "Ben, what's wrong with us? We were so happy once!"

Ben did not know. "I suppose I've failed you, Sonia. Whatever you thought I had when you married me wasn't there. You're disappointed, and I don't blame you. Look, hon: I'm tired. Let's sleep, huh?"

"Don't you ever think of me, Ben? Of how I must feel in a place like this? With nothing ahead at all?" She wanted to goad him to anger, hating his quiet acceptance of failure. "Oh, if I were only the man of the family! I've the guts for the two of us—and you won't let me use them. It isn't fair!" He flinched, but she plunged on: "If you



won't fight for me as other men fight for their wives, you might at least let me try for happiness in my own way."

His voice was muffled. "Sonia, I'm making a living for you—not a bad one either. I don't know what you mean by there being 'nothing ahead.' I used to think there was always 'us' ahead—no matter what." She thought: Now he doesn't. "I suppose you'd like me to be a big businessman, but to me that's just funny. It's so unreal it's funny. I wouldn't want the responsibility, for one thing. I don't say I like being a milkman, but I'll never be much else. Make up your mind to it. . . . After all, other women are thankful for an adequate living and don't demand more! . . . Now, I want to go to sleep."

Sonia sighed with the hopelessness of it. "Ben, let's not sleep on a quarrel."

"O.K. O.K. Forget it."

"Ben—"

No answer. No move. She reached out and found his arm, but he shook her off impatiently. She turned over and started to cry. Because they were real tears of unhappiness, she hoped he would never know, but of course he did. He rose abruptly on one elbow.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" he said. And then, after a second, "That won't get you a damned thing!"

Sonia jammed a pillow over her face. Ben curled into a knot.

Neither got to sleep.

## XV

"KIT," Freda called. "The mail's come."

Carroll yelled, "I'll get it, I'll get it!" But Kit was on the way. Carroll chased him to the corner, but gave up there.

Freda added evenly: "If you'd like to run an errand, Carroll, you could get me a dozen eggs from the creamery."

But this was different. "Naw. I don't wanta. Go yourself."

"Please?" Soon, Freda thought, she would run her own errands again. She was no longer afraid of what they might be saying at the creamery: it didn't matter. They could say it to her face, if they dared. She would go there soon, and let them. Soon, but not today.

Kit yelled from the front hallway: "It's on'y a letter for daddy from Wisconsin. From Cousin Amy, huh?"

"I suppose. Leave it on the table." She spoke quite calmly, but as the front screen banged behind Kit, she was tempted momentarily to go look at it. The curiosity was fleeting, however, and she went on working.

Kit appeared on the back stoop. "Hey, where'd they go? Where's Carroll and Willie?"

"Getting me some eggs, I guess. Have a fresh cookie?"

"Gee, more cookies? I'm bustin' now, I ate so many this week. Why all the cooking all of a sudden?"

Carroll and Willie returned. "Here's your old eggs," Carroll said.

"Thank you very much."

"Aw, whyn't you get 'em yourself? You afraid? You got cold feet?"

Kit cried: "Oh-h-h! Am I gonna tell! Carroll's gonna get spa-anked! Carroll's gonna get spa-anked! Daddy said not to tease Freda. Daddy'll use the horse strap on you—and will you yell!"

"I will not. He couldn't make me. Besides, you better not say anything, or I'll tell on you. I didn't mean *that* at all. It was you started talking about *that*!"

Freda said quietly, "If you want to fight, get out of my kitchen. Go on, now. Both of you." Her calm was no affectation; the boys could talk about *that* without causing her a quiver any more.

She herded them through the door, missing Willie who was investigating a fruit bowl in the pantry. He emerged a moment later to ask, "Where'd they go? Hey, you wanna banana?"

"Outside, and you'd better go too. No banana, thanks."

"Y' oughta eat more," Willie said. "You look tough." He was a handsome youngster, not yet grown, but curiously mature in his serious moments, and he was serious now. He said: "You look like something the plow turned up. You're all pale and got lines like an old woman." He glanced up to see how she was taking it. "You should eat more."

"I eat all I want."

"You think I'm just the kid brother and don't know much, but I mean it: you'll get sick on us!" No answer. "You're more like pop everyday. You don't smile, and there's no expression in your face. You're getting as dead-pan as he is. That ain't how a woman oughta be. Someone oughta talk to you, an' I guess it's me."

"Sorry, Willie. I don't feel like smiling."

"Why not? That that happened at school the other night? Oh, I know.

I ain't supposed to talk about that, an' if you wanta get me licked, you can tell pop. But if I were you I'd get it off my chest."

With a little persuasion, she thought, surprised, she might talk to Willie. Something about his young cocksureness was appealingly strong and masculine. She said, "In a way."

"What happened, huh? You get scared, or what?"

"I just failed, that's all."

"I read a poem in front of my school once and wasn't scared."

"But if you had been, would you want to be reminded of it?"

Willie considered judicially. "Nope," he said. "I guess not. Just the same, you'd be better off talking about it. You can't go around working and starving yourself to death like this and not saying anything. It ain't healthy." He paused at the door. "I'm tellin' you: you look like hell already."

"Willie!" Freda pretended to be shocked.

"Well, you do," the boy said, and vanished.

Swan, home to lunch, paused a long while in the front hall before coming to the kitchen with the Wisconsin letter open in his hand.

Freda, serving up, ignored him pointedly, and he waited, watching.

"You feel well, Freda?"

"Very well, thank you."

"You don't look it. You're the color of dried hay."

"I've heard how badly I look often enough already. Excuse me, please."

Swan moved out of her way. "I've a letter from your Cousin Amy."

The girl made a trip to the dining room, not answering.

He said, "Will you quit running around? I'm talking to you."

"Of course." She halted instantly. "I'm sorry." She waited in a submissive attitude, and he was annoyed, for her obedience to his orders had been increasingly servile recently, and he knew it was intended as a reproach. Not that he blamed her.

"It's from your Cousin Amy," he repeated. "They've sickness and can't take you even temporarily. I—I'm sorry. I'd hoped—"

"It's all right." She said it without apparent disappointment.

Swan wet his lips. "I've been thinking what else I could do. I can't take a trip myself at this season, but"—he drew a deep breath—"perhaps you'd want to go alone?" The suggestion assumed not only that she had learned her lesson but had matured enough to apply it in any circumstances, and Freda had no idea what it was costing him to make it.

It was a desperate gesture to regain her lost confidence. "How long a trip it might be would depend. Perhaps at some summer resort—"

"That's all right," she said. "Never mind about a trip."

Swan blinked. "What do you mean? Is there something else you want?"

"I'll stay here."

"But the other night you were wild to get away—"

"Things have changed." Freda's light monotone was untouched by feeling. "Nothing matters. I'll just stay here. I'll be all right."

Swan was more disturbed than he cared to admit. "Isn't there some friend you'd like to visit? When we talked before—"

"No. Things were different then. . . . May I serve luncheon now?"

"No! . . . I want to know what's happened? Why this change? What—"

"I've had a chance to think," she said, "and I've decided that I don't care about people—so I don't have to go away."

There was a considerable silence. Swan sighed. "I'm no good at saying what I mean, but—try and understand: I—I'm afraid I haven't done well as a father, Freda. I see that now. You were too competent around the house. I never thought of you as a growing girl, so I never really saw your side of things. I handled this business like a fool. But, believe me, I did understand—finally. Too late, I know, but at least I did. I'd have given anything in the world to help you—and I couldn't. I still would, but now I'm lost again. I don't know what you're thinking or what's happened to you. I'll do anything—if you'll only tell me what."

She said: "It's quite all right. You've done what you could. You wrote to Cousin Amy, and your offer of a trip is very generous, but I don't care to go now. Thank you very much, just the same."

It was mechanical, and her calm frightened him. Swan preferred the hysteria that had met him after the fiasco of the other evening, which had been natural. This—

The man had some understanding of the human mind from personal observation, and while he was far from grasping all the implications of Freda's attitude, he was worried. She seemed to have walled off a whole section of experience and to be ignoring it; and to Swan this was no solution for a problem.

The worst of it was, he could not reach her. He knew, even before he tried, that it would be no use; the gift of tongues was not his.

But he did try. Often, in the days that followed.

For Freda, all hurt and shame in connection with what had happened had dulled; what remained was a feeling of unreality, as though she had dreamt or imagined it. She felt lightheaded, fairylike, ethereal, but had acquired a peculiarly impersonal dislike for everyone from the farm women down to her own brattish brothers. She could remember without cringing the details of Friday evening, and she could wonder without anguish what people had been saying about her; but perhaps the thickness of the armor she had thrown up and the speed with which it had developed were some indication of the injury that had been done her.

Four years before, a motor accident had killed her mother, robbing the girl of sympathetic help during a critical period and forcing on her the responsibilities of a household. It had also left her virtually alone, for Swan, conceiving of her at one moment as a very small child and at the next as a woman grown, thanks to her efficiency in running his home, had fallen miserably between the two concepts and achieved no understanding of his daughter whatsoever. Nor had she friends, because her housework had left her so few leisure hours that her acquaintance at the farm and among the girls at school had had no chance to ripen.

It was a loneliness of which Freda was largely unaware. She had been born to keep house and had no other urge, no conflicting desire, no wish to escape. Her duties had taught her a self-reliance which she had relished and perhaps exaggerated, and she had liked her small, useful world with its important trivia and minor worries. She had been content with it, and it had kept her so busy that she had had no understanding and small awareness of the forces slowly maturing within her. Indeed, between school and housekeeping, her thoughts and her hours had been so crowded that those forces might even have been slow to develop. Her dates had been unimportant and unexciting, and girls of her age who suddenly acquired "crushes" on boys were simply beyond her comprehension.

Thus she had been bewildered by the farm's suddenly developed hate of her: hate it must have been if people dared embarrass her before her whole school. It seemed to stem from something she and Mickey Pratt were supposed to have done after the Ochses' party; but what this was remained mysterious and terrible. Perhaps she had an instinctive realization; but it was not specific, and her mind shrank from it, shutting it out. Certain immodesties occurred to her, and her imagination conceived vague and nightmarish horrors without outline or detail, as frightening as black-robed figures sensed in the dark; but the fact remained, she did not *know* of what she was accused.

It had been bad having everybody believe things about her which she herself could not even imagine, hating her for them, and punishing her. It had been very bad, but it had been her ignominious and public failure which had turned the knife in the wound and made it intolerable. That that failure had been forced upon her rendered it no less humiliating. Freda recalled with distaste the spectacle she had made of herself before Swan that night. But how could she have helped it when her feelings were tearing her apart?

Ah, but that was over. Nature has a way of taking care of the intolerable, and she had developed a protective hide. She had told herself, "I'm not guilty of whatever-it-is, so there's no reason to be ashamed; if people are silly enough to think I am, they're too silly to bother about." It was that simple. True, she had told herself this frequently before; but now she believed it, and for no other reason than that she had to.

She had, she told herself, matured. She knew now what emotion was: not a frothy, transient mood but a deep, strong current that needed no surface expression to be real. But, though aware of her new depths, she had mastered them; this was the measure of her maturity. She disdained to wallow and kept her mood light and insubstantial. She was not depressed or unhappy, and if she rarely smiled, neither did she cry. She was actually proud of her detachment, and encouraged it, never questioning its roots or depth, never realizing it was maintained only because she worked so hard that she had no energy to think.

The Ellis house had never been so clean, its pantry had never been so full, its meals never so elaborate. She had sewed evenings and read nights after the rest were abed, and still had found herself wishing that there were more to do—and more!—or that she were still in school so that there would be less time to fill. But the feverish activity had achieved its purpose, stifling thought and leaving her too tired to indulge in self-analysis before she slept.

Unconscious of what she had been doing, she knew merely that her impersonal, weightless mood had persisted and spread. People no longer mattered. The boys' clumsy references glanced off; Swan's offer of a trip was nice but unnecessary. And the gibes of the farm people when she faced them, as she soon would, would be just as easy to take. She had built a wall about herself and was inside it alone—how alone, she had scarcely realized as yet. At least no one could get at her there; she could not be hurt.

She was so sure of it, she yearned to put it to the test.

She would, she thought, in a few more days. She wanted to.

Facing people would be the ultimate trial of her defenses, would be also satisfying defiance of those who had misunderstood and hurt her.

She was getting Sunday dinner when she found herself short of cream. On the spur of the moment she thought: I could go myself instead of sending the boys for it; this would be a good day, Sunday—there would be fewer people at the plant.

And she went.

Giving herself no time to think, feeling elated and quite certain of herself in spite of the nervous tension that gripped her as she left the house, she crossed the lawn toward the creamery. Almost running lest the fear which impulsive action had outdistanced catch up with her, she rounded the end of the building, climbed the steps to the stoop, and went through the wooden windscreen onto the dock.

The first person she saw was Steve Ochs, and her heart contracted.

He saw her before she could turn and came toward her instantly, his dark face split in a triangular, derisive grin. "Well," he said, "look who's loose again! How y' doin', Freda?"

"All right."

The grin grew. "Swan's girl, huh? They can't keep y' down?"

"I want a half-pint of heavy, please."

"R-right!" His crisp salute was derisive too, but oddly friendly. Steve was glad to see her about—he had felt responsible for her—and she sensed it.

He would have brought the cream back to her, but she chose to follow him down the platform. Ihloff and Tom North were unloading at the other end, and her bravado mood urged her to face them too. If they were no worse than Steve had been—

But Ihloff looked up at her approach, and his silly smile bared gums indistinguishable from his discolored teeth, while Tom North's eyes flicked down her figure in speculation.

"If she ain't back—fin'ly!" Ihloff crowed. "Hiya, Freda keed! Where'd you go from the school the other night, huh? To see a man about some bushes?"

Freda's throat tightened. She felt dizzy but heard herself answering in a strange dry voice: "I was so scared I swallowed my false teeth and had to go look for some baking soda."

Kenny whooped, expressing his appreciation with a word that made Tom North look startled and then embarrassed.

Steve bounced out of the box. "Hey now, what goes on?"

"She's all right," Ihloff cried. "She come up with a crack!"

"Yeah? Well, lay off her."

"She's all right!" Ihloff said.

Steve put her cream in her apron pocket and pushed her ahead of him.

"Don't pay him no mind. He don't know nothin'. Forget it."

"He didn't say much," Freda said.

Her palms were sweaty, and she had to find a handkerchief to dry them off, but she was almost exultant with relief. She had done it! She had taken a gibe and answered it. Now the rest would be easy.

Steve went with her to the windscreen, where he stopped to mark her purchase on the sales register. Freda stepped on through—and came face to face with Ida Heim.

Ida looked startled, and one hand went instinctively to her hair to pat its dingy straggleness into place; then, in tense silence, her gray face slowly crimsoned. "Well!" she said, and drew herself up. "Well." Her eyes raked Freda up and down, and her lips set primly. "I must say I hardly expected you'd dare show your face so soon!"

Freda tried to hold herself together, but could feel her indifference breaking up. What could she say? She slipped past the woman hastily.

"You see?" Ida sneered. "A tart can't face a decent woman."

Freda sensed the viciousness of the name from Ida's tone, and she whirled, hating her. She cried, "You—you—you—*beast!*"

Ida smirked, and even Steve grinned. It was an aimless epithet, but Freda lacked the vocabulary to do the moment justice. Her futile anger choked her, and she turned and ran, hiding her tears.

Mrs. Heim said complacently, "That should teach her, I think."

"Maybe." Steve stepped down to where the girl had stood, and picked two wisps of cloth off the ground. "You had her going," he said, "only if I were you, I wouldn't stand so close to her next time."

Seconds before, the two rags had been Freda's handkerchief.

On Monday there was a cold raw mist in the air, slowly turning to rain. The thermometer read fifty-five, and the damp crept clammily indoors, settling on every surface like cold perspiration.

Freda, standing in the doorway of Swan's study, shivered, but not with cold. She was alone in the house because Swan was at work and the boys had gone to the Ochses' to play, but it was not her loneliness which set her trembling either. It was the intention in her mind and the odd disgust and shame which held her back from it.

The study was a tiny cubicle barely large enough for an old-fashioned



desk, a chair, a couch, and a stand. It was the stand at which she looked from the doorway, but it was the desk to which she went when she finally entered. She fumbled aimlessly in its muddle of time sheets, order blanks, bills, and advertisements, trying to pretend she was hunting for a pencil; but this was an evasion which could last only till she found one. In the end she sat down, the swivel chair creaking its protest and then, after another long gap as she debated, squealing as she bent to lift from the shelf of the stand the dictionary which was the symbol of Swan's determination and ambition.

Holding the big volume on her lap, Freda opened it to T.

*T-a . . . t-a-f . . . t-a-m . . . t-a-r . . .*

There it was: *t-a-r-t*.

With assumed indifference, Freda read: ". . . sharp to the taste; acidulous . . . Figuratively, sharp; keen . . . biting . . . To make acid or piquant. . . . A pie or piece of pastry, consisting . . ."

It made no sense, and she read it over again, puzzled.

Had she spelled it wrong? Had Ida called her something that sounded like "tart" but was spelled another way?

She tried the "Addenda." Sometimes you found words there that were not in the regular part.

Sure enough: "tart, n.—2. (Slang) A light woman."

The girl stared at it. What was a light woman?

It didn't sound nice, and it must have been what Ida had meant to call her, but—what did it mean?

Freda turned to the W's and looked up "woman."

There was no such phrase, but "lawful woman," "single woman," "scarlet woman," and "wise woman" were referred to their adjectives so Freda flipped over half the book and found the word "light."

"Light" as an adjective, as a verb, as a noun. Columns and columns of it, including a host of phrases. Freda scanned them slowly and carefully and by the time she reached "light<sup>2</sup>, a. and n." with sixteen different meanings trailing it, was somewhat daunted. She had felt happy about none of this, and the words' being so hard to find seemed almost like a hint to stop.

But then she came to—

10. Lacking moral or mental gravity; characterized by or exhibiting levity; volatile; capricious; frivolous: as, a *light* mind; *light* conduct. . . .

Hence—11. Given to levity of conduct; loose in morals; wanton; unchaste.

*A light wife doth make a heavy husband.*

*Shak.*, M. of V., v. 1. 130

The ghawazee, clad in light garments that cling to them, sprawl easily, and sport with one another till the guests are assembled. . . . These are the *light* women of Egypt; and there are none *lighter* on the face of the globe.

C. W. Stoddard, *Mashallah*, xviii.

There it was: "light women." Loose in morals. Wanton. Unchaste.

Odd how words could be familiar and still have no meaning when you wanted to know *exactly* what was intended.

Freda was miserable. She had never thought of using the dictionary in this way before; it was hateful, yet it teased her curiosity. She wanted to pry on, but was ashamed.

She looked up "unchaste" and it said, "Not chaste; not continent; libidinous; lewd"—which was no help. Nasty words, but unenlightening.

Down the column a bit, under "unchastity," it said: ". . . unlawful indulgence of the sexual appetite." This set Freda trembling and made her slightly sick, though she hardly knew why.

She tried "wanton" and there were a lot of meanings, but part way down she ran into "lewd" and "libidinous" again, coupled now with "lustful," "lascivious," and "licentious," so she sought the letter L.

Apparently the meanings of all these words were much the same; but there were new elements. One meaning of "lascivious" was "tending to excite voluptuous emotions," which gave her a very queer feeling deep inside. Under "libidinous" she read, ". . . having . . . an eager appetite for sexual indulgence; . . . also, fitted to excite lustful desire," while under "lust" she found, ". . . carnal desire; sexual appetite; unlawful desire for sexual pleasure; concupiscence."

She felt dirty. She shrank each time she looked up a new word; yet there was an odd fascination in it, and she was unable to stop. It was horrible and hypnotic. Each time she thought, This is the last—no more, no matter what I find. And each time she was lured ahead. They were oddly exciting words, cold and impersonal though they looked on the page, and they conjured odd shapes in the mind. Freda hated them, yet a queer, congested, tingling sensation throughout her body egged her on.

In an odd trance, she sought the S's and the word "sexual."

Words leapt from the definition that made her flinch, ugly words, terrible words that left her flushed and breathing hard.

She would not read them. Dragging her eyes from the book, she fixed them blindly on the far wall, resisting. She did not want to know! She would not read. She would close the dictionary here and now.

She tried to, but her hands refused, for the knowledge of secret things was hot in body and mind.

And then the side door banged, feet pounded in the hall, and Willie was shouting, "Hey, Freda! Freda! Where's my copper wire?" He burst in on the way to the living room before she could move.

She stammered, "Copper wire? Copper wire? I—I—I—"

"What's a matter? . . . Never mind; I'll find it. . . . Hey, you wanta ruin that book? Look how you jammed the pages when you shut it! What you lookin' up anyway?"

"Nothing much."

It was an idle question. Willie had already hurried on toward the closet where the boys' junk was kept.

Freda tried to smooth the pages she had crushed in her haste. She felt scarlet and sick and wondered how much he had noticed. Suppose he had seen what she was reading? Suppose his curiosity made him look at those crumpled pages sometime?

She wished violently and wretchedly that she had left her ignorance alone. She would have wished this later even if Willie had not caught her, but the prospect of someone's finding out what she had been doing was appalling.

At least she was no tart, let Ida Heim say what she would!

She was not unchaste or lewd or lustful. This much she knew, though, in specific understanding of what she was supposed to have done, she was but little advanced. Her curiosity had merely shown her how little she really understood; it had drawn her to the edge of a Great Unknown which had heretofore been barely sensed, a blank like the white spaces marked "Unexplored" on the maps at school, only this space was not white. It was black and ugly and held a treacherous, shabby attraction which she had felt and did not wish to feel again: an attraction that was hateful—and dangerous.

## XVI

"It's nice here, Hal. I love the way the trees close down over the car. They shut us in so close. There's just room enough under them for us and nobody else. It's our own private place. Look: there's a star up there through the branches. It's red and goes on and off. Bend down, and you can see it."

"Why in hell should I disturb us both to look at a star?"

"Just 'cause. . . . Gee, I love it here! . . . I'm so warm and comfy, Hal. I was afraid it'd be cold tonight. I mean, it is cold outside, but I guess we—we warm it up in here, don't we?"

"Uh. Like this, huh?"

"Uh-h-h—stop! Gee, Hal, don't do things like that! It's not nice."

"The hell it's not! If you don't like it, you can go home. Want to?"

"N-no, but . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"The wheel hurts my shoulder blade when you kiss me so hard."

"Mind?" . . .

"That was a good movie, wasn't it? . . . Wasn't it, Hal?"

"Yeah, I guess so. But if we hadn't seen the damned thing we'd of been out here an hour and a half earlier."

"Did you—want to be?"

"Don't be coy. You can't do this in a movie theater. Not—this!"

"Huh-uh. You almost do, though—sometimes." . . .

"Oh, gee, Hal, it's so wonderful—the night and being together and all! It's just swell! . . . To think I've lived around here all my life and never knew about this place before. I bet nobody knows about it. I used to think other cars might try to come in, it's so close to the road, but nobody ever has. I guess no one knows about it but us. . . . Hal—how're things on the farm? I haven't heard hardly anything since I left the office. They all right? What kind of kittens did Mrs. Walsh's cat have? I was betting with Pop Haas they'd be calico after the big Tom that hangs around the barns."

"How in hell would I know?"

"I thought you might. . . . How's your route? Growing?"

"Look, I didn't come out here to talk about the farm or my route—"

"Aw, Hal, I was just—making conversation. Don't get mad."

"I don't know why girls have to talk. If you're getting ideas—don't! I mean, the route's my business and won't ever be yours."

"I don't know what you mean, Hal . . ."

"What time is it?"

"Turn on the dash, and I'll see. . . . It's ten past eleven."

"I gotta get home and get some sleep. Come on. Sit up."

"Kiss me before we go."

"We're not going yet. Sit up."

"Aw, Hal—no!"

"Why get all excited if you don't do anything about it? It's not good for you. To hell with that!"

"Ah, but, Hal—honey—"

"What the hell? You gone prude all of a sudden? . . . Well then, sit up. Let me over where you are."

"Hal, please! I don't want to. It makes me feel—cheap."

"You never said that three weeks ago. Never even tried to!"

"Gee, I didn't know what to say! It was our first date, and only the second time I'd ever seen you; I didn't think you'd try anything. Not right off. I thought you'd stop with kissing me, our first time out. I never thought— But you didn't. And you got me so worked up I—I—"

"Damn right! And don't kid me that I was the first. So why stall this late in the game? Come on—"

"But, Hal— Gee! You'll get tired of me if—every time—"

"I'll get tired of you a damned sight quicker if you hold out. You're a good kid and a swell looker; but the girls I like are the ones who come across—and get a kick out of it, same as I do. If that's how you want to play, swell! If not—I ain't forcing myself on anyone. Get me? Well, that's how it is, and it's up to you. What d'you want?" . . .

"O.K., then. I guess you fallen for me some. I do' know why girls can't enjoy themselves without going slushy. But remember I never pretended: you knew all along what I wanted, and that I wasn't in love with you or intending to get married. Now don't get mad. I ain't bawling you out; but girls get ideas sometimes, and we should understand each other."

"I'm not mad."

"Fine. . . . Now let's get comfortable here. . . . You all right?"

"Hal, I'll do it sometime, but not tonight. I don't feel like it."

"What you wearing a girdle for? To make things harder?"

"There's a zipper on it."

"If you want to talk, don't whisper! What did you say?"

"Aw, Hal, let's not. I—I'm scared! Suppose something happened?"

"What?"

"Well—you know! Gee!"

"So that's what's biting you. Look: if you think I'm fooling around without being careful, you're nuts. We're well protected."

"I know but—I've heard—sometimes—"

"Forget it." . . .

"Now what's wrong? What you bawling for?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just feel—choked up—"

"Goddam you. I told you ten times, if you'd relax and let yourself go—I can't do everything!"

"I couldn't. I was too scared."

"Oh, for Chris' sake! . . . Anyway, quit crying. I don't like girls that cry. . . . Come on now. You going to lie there all night? We gotta get home. It's late."

## XVII

THE waitress poised her pencil suggestively, and Nat Friedman said: "What'll you drink, Steve? This is on me. A Manhattan? . . . Waitress, two Manhattans and two steak dinners with all the trimmings. That suit you, Steve?"

Ochs nodded, but added when the girl had departed, "They soak you like hell for a steak dinner here."

"We have to celebrate the 1st of July, don't we? It only comes once a year. Besides"—with a laugh—"it's on the expense account."

"I may not pick your line, Nat. That's fair warning."

"Oh, no obligation. Not the slightest. Good Lord, no!" When their drinks came he lifted his glass. "To our future business, Mr. Ochs!"

And Steve capped it blandly: "Be it much or little."

Friedman sipped the drink, set it down. Steve's glass was already on the table, empty, and he was fishing for the cherry.

"Moses!" Nat said. "You get rid of 'em fast, don't you? Well, it's your throat, I suppose. . . . Now, about the new creamery—"

"Well," Steve said, "it's all set. We break ground in late October or early November, and the plant's supposed to open April 1st. They'll be wanting machinery in February. Is that where you come in?"

Friedman pushed his toothbrush mustache in two directions with his thumb and forefinger. "I'd certainly like to. In fact, my firm 'd be happy to take the whole headache off your hands, plan the layout, install our best processing equipment, and all at a cost that would amaze you."

"Talked to Thomas about it?"

"Uh—yes. A couple of times. Very amicably. But I've been anxious to see you. After all, as plant manager, you're the one to be satisfied. This is a case in which your judgment should carry even more weight than Mr. Thomas's, perhaps the deciding weight."

"What's the matter? Didn't Ed like your stuff?"

"Oh, I think so, yes." But a sheen of moisture had appeared on the salesman's forehead. "He talked about the Wright line a lot, but some buyers do that purposely to get unfavorable angles on a product from the rival salesman—"

Steve said, "Ed's pretty sold on Wright Company."

"Uh—really? I can't understand that. I don't knock my rivals, so I'll admit their equipment is good. But why should an eastern dairy go to the Middle West for its stuff when it can get better right here? Moreover, there's the installation and service angles. Someone close to you can take care of both far better than someone half a continent away. . . . You know our line, don't you? Then I needn't sell it to you: you know it's good. Now Mr. Thomas is no plant man, and he's been reading Wright's advertising, which is misleading; but I'm sure he'd rely on your knowledge, experience, and judgment." The salesman waited expectantly, but there was no response. "I hope you're not sold on Wright Company too?"

Steve shrugged indifferently as the waitress arrived with their dinner. When they were alone again, Friedman said:

"I've some literature I'd like you to look at, previewing the new models that'll be shown at the milk convention next fall, the ones I want you to order—"

"I'll look at 'em sometime." Steve attacked his steak.

The salesman frowned. "Perhaps you'd prefer to come to our home office, Steve—over a week end, perhaps—and look at our stuff. Expenses paid, of course. You'd see some honeys! We've the sweetest pasteurizer—"

"I know it."

Steve's flat lack of interest hauled Friedman up short. After a second, he added: "We wouldn't spend all our time at the plant, you know. We've some interesting places in our town—"

"Yeah?"

It was an offer that should have appealed to a man like Steve, Nat felt sure, and he frowned at the rebuff. "Hell, Steve, what's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing."

"Your help 'd be worth a lot to me, you know."

"How much?"

"What?" Friedman boggled. "Why—why—why—we don't do much of that sort of thing. But perhaps, for effective help on a big order—"

"How much?"

"Well—uh—five per cent of our profit—"

"For five per cent of the *order* you might buy my silent good will, but not very damned much else. Why, I get ten on everyday stuff. This is big! This'll run to money, and I want fifteen on it. For that I'll guarantee an order that'll run above an agreed figure. If it doesn't, I'll take ten."

Sweat beaded Friedman's face. "Fifteen? Fifteen! Why, good God, man, we couldn't possibly. Our margin of profit—"

"—will take care of it and then some."

"Uh-uh. Selling at stock prices, we couldn't come close to it."

"Then boost 'em. I don't care who pays my cut."

"But my estimate 'd be way off."

"Tell Ed costs went up or something."

"And my prices would be out of line."

"You don't get me, Nat. I'll sell Ed Thomas whatever I choose to sell him—hang the price!" Steve's olive face darkened. "You don't believe I can, uh? Well, I know plants and plant machinery, mister. There's none on the market that's perfect from every angle, and I can kill Ed's interest in any I want by proving its faults. I can do that to your advantage—or at your expense."

Nat said quickly, "Well, I'll talk to the office, Steve. It's just that—well—we've never done anything on this scale before—"

"Uh-huh!"

"You mentioned a guarantee—"

"List the equipment we need, all new stuff and no turn-ins; figure it at your own price, and I'll guarantee you three-quarters of it."

Brightening a little, Nat fished out a pencil and envelope. "Well, let's see now. First you'll want a bottle washer—"

Steve muttered, "That's such a lousy job you guys put out—"

"What's wrong with it? It's the same machine Meyer-Dumore makes—"

"Like hell!"

"Sure it is—only under a different name. Anyway, all our machines are synchronized with it. I don't need to tell you, Steve, the importance of getting machines that'll work smoothly together—"

"Yeah, but that piece of junk you put out—"

"You mean you won't recommend it? It's the most expensive item on the list, and to leave it out 'd cut the order below your guarantee right off. Goodbye fifteen per cent."

"Oh, y' got around to giving me that, huh?"

"That's for the office to decide."



"Tell 'em Wrights have offered me ten, and that Wright puts out a washer I could put my heart into selling. It's no Meyer-Dumore, but it has its points. Fifteen per cent is about all that could reconcile me to yours."

"You win," Friedman said. "I'll win them around."

"Now you're talking."

The list on Nat's envelope grew. To the bottle washer were added pasteurizers, coolers, holding tanks, a bottler, weigh scale, cheese vat, case washer, and can washer. They discussed sizes. "Ed's sold on a one-twenty-a-minute bottler and a sixteen-wide washer," Steve said. "We don't need 'em now, but the place is growing, and we're looking ahead." They discussed styles. And prices.

Steve was increasingly excited. His eyes shone, his olive face beamed, and his high-pitched laugh rang out often. This was the biggest venture he had ever attempted. Up to now he had been dealing in petty cash, but if he could sell Thomas on Friedman's company, the Ochses would be in the big money at last. Even if he couldn't, Wright would give him ten—or perhaps twelve-and-a-half—per cent.

If?

Steve wished he were manager of the plant himself; then there would be no one to be "sold" on his choices. He could make his own.

"Say," he said, "about that trip to your plant, and the rest. Maybe I could make it after all. How 'bout it?"

"Oh, sure." It was Friedman's turn to be unenthusiastic.

"Fine! Next week end, maybe? . . . We'll do the town!"

"Yeah," Nat said dully, "sure. Anything you like."

They discussed their deal over a drink later and sealed it with another, and by the time Steve returned to the farm he was high with both alcohol and elation. Nat dropped him in front of the creamery; and there he was promptly hailed by Lew Barchi, who was limping across from the garage. Steve answered as though the little cripple were his long-lost pal, which surprised Lew until he caught the odor of rye on the breeze.

Knowing that you could talk to Steve drunk or sober, he said with a casual but cautious glance around to see that they were alone, "You thought over what we talked about?"

"Huh? What? Oh, about the plant and all. Naah, I didn't bother."

Barchi said earnestly: "You're crazy, Steve. I got an angle—"

"Look, I asked you a question—remember? What's in it for me? You

get yourself a raise at least, but me—I'm plant manager. If I tell the boys to strike, I'm in Dutch. If it looks like they struck in spite of me, I still get nothing, even if they do. So why stick my neck out?"

"Wait," Barchi said. "And don't talk so loud. I been thinking, and there's an angle. Lemme ask you: What does Melius want of this dairy?"

"Melius? A profit, I guess."

"Sure, and Ed Thomas gets it for him, so Thomas is O.K. But if we strike and win, the farm pays us more and the profit's less—so maybe Melius gets sore and we have a new manager! . . . Whaddaya mean there's nothing in it for you?"

Steve looked thoughtful, and Barchi pressed the advantage: "A smart guy could find a way to make Thomas look bad while he looked good. Ed 'd have to take the rap when the boys win—"

"If they win."

"How can we miss? Jesus Christ! It's in the bag."

Steve laughed shortly. "Oh, yeah? And wouldn't I have a hell of a time looking good to Melius while my own boys were doing that? Naaa, there's too many *if's*. The scheme's no good."

"Think it over," Barchi said. "You'll change your mind." He raised his hand and limped away, while Steve remained standing in the drive.

Steve did not move, for a pulse was thudding in his ears. No, Lew's scheme was no good, but—but it suggested another: What if there were a strike, but the management—not the drivers—won it? What if Thomas looked good handling it, instead of bad? Just the first of last month Ted Snathe had said that Eastern Dairies were interested in him.

Steve did not believe in bucking a tide. You could try to hurt a "coming" man and only hurt yourself; but if you helped him you got rid of him as fast and had his gratitude into the bargain, which might make the question of succession simpler.

Steve slapped fist into palm with the excitement of the thought. He had hold of something—something good!—and yet he held himself in check. He would make no snap decisions. There was time and to spare, and when you played for big stakes you played carefully.

But he was still high when he entered the creamery through the ice-cream room and found Amos Vliet standing at the plate-glass window giving on the drive, eating ice cream from a paper cup. He asked: "What's the matter with you? Something broke down?"

Amos mumbled, "No. Larry got the icebox messed up, and I hadda quit bottling till it was straightened out." He liked taking slaps at Steve's brother. He added, pointing: "We saw you talkin' to Barchi."

What goes on? You turning Communist? Planning to organize the plant?"

"Comes the revolution, we'll make Thomas abdicate and take over the dairy." Steve liked kidding close to the truth.

"My, my! Well, when you're manager, remember your old friends."

Steve grinned. "Maybe you think I won't be!"

He went on to the bottling room, his mind and Amos's sharing the same question: Who had been kidding whom, and how much? But Amos thought about it longer than Steve because he knew Steve pretty well.

## XVIII

TRADITIONALLY, the farm celebrated the Fourth of July with a party. It had originated as a testimonial from Mr. Melius to his department heads, but now was a general celebration to which everyone down to the smelliest barn hand was invited and everyone came because it was politic to come. The affair was anticipated with more annoyance, reluctance, and cynicism than anything else; but perhaps any social life was better than none, and it was, at least, a genuine community effort and an event in Weyland Meadows' usually uneventful life.

Preparations started early in the day, though the party would not begin till the drivers, the plant, and the barns had finished their work—in the dairy business there are no holidays. The weather was fine but not too warm, and Ed Thomas, deciding that by evening people would be more comfortable indoors, had the trucks and tractors run out of the garage; in its big rectangular storage section he set Adrian Heim and Oz Tatum to knocking up benches, tables, and a platform for dancing while Red Walsh and Happy Jacobs strung wires and paper lanterns from the steel beams overhead. Both tasks were done grudgingly, for Adrian felt he should be working on the maternity barn if at all, and Red had warned Thomas repeatedly that he didn't know when Number Nine Truck would get its new rings if not today. Ed paid no attention.

Every farm kitchen was busy. The dairy paid for the food, or supplied it, but the actual cooking had been widely distributed to give each family its interest and its share in the day and the event. Dinner would be lavish and masculine. Mrs. Vaccarelli and Blanche Ochs were roasting

chickens; Ida Heim had a ham in the oven; Sonia Goetz, two big dishes of scalloped potatoes. Luella Walsh had to supply pickles, relishes, buttered rolls, cheeses, and jellies—a task she had always had and always hated, but Ed had taken none of the women into consultation in assigning tasks or planning the meal. Roxy Dann was furnishing hot dogs and hamburgers—a reluctant concession, for Ed himself had no use for the things; and there were some concessions to the feminine element in the shape of Mrs. Ihloff's potato salad and Mrs. Cooper's green one. Lemonade was by courtesy of Allie Ochs, and the creamery had bottled two cases of Guernsey half-pints for the milk-drinkers. To cap the meal there were three large watermelons, a special batch of butter-pecan ice-cream cups which Steve had had frozen, and cake and cookies from the Ellis pantry.

The day's program actually began with an innovation generally credited to Steve Ochs, a soft-ball game between the "creamery" and the "barn" which the latter (a bunch of ringers, according to the creamery, since they included two garage men, two chicken men, a carpenter, a farm hand, a driver, Willie Ellis who had been "kidnaped," and Steve's boy Duke, who had been "stolen," as against only Boo Fusek and Mickey Pratt from the barn itself) won 5-4 on Duke's pitching.

While this was going on, the crowd gradually assembled. Few of the seasonal transients came, but about sixty of the regular men were there, the married ones with their wives and children. There were visitors also: Fred Quinlan and a scattering of dealers from the metropolitan area; some of the farm's contributing producers; even a handful of customers invited by their drivers.

It was an indigestible assortment, for a major cleavage existed. The families who lived at the dairy, comprising barely half the pay roll, were cliquish. Their tight community had become so sufficient unto itself that they had lost the ability and the desire to make friends and even avoided people with other interests and other animosities. Those who "lived off," with little mutual acquaintance on which to base a rival clique, seemed lonely and lost among farm men and women who chattered with other farm men and women, and farm children who played noisily and exclusively with other farm children. A few tried to bridge the gap. Some of the city dwellers drew their families into the farm groups; Steve Ochs, who really enjoyed people, circulated freely; Swan Ellis, with a wide acquaintance, paused to talk with many he knew, and Thomas and Wharton Pettitt played host dutifully, though both were ill adapted to the role.

Most of the men and some of the children had gravitated toward the ball game; when this was over, players and spectators straggled back, hot, tired, ready to eat, clustering at the tables, sampling with myriad fingers and being told shrilly that the meal was not ready. Somebody started the radio-victrola which had been rented for the occasion, and dancing flourished while people shouted in order to be heard above the din, and youngsters got underfoot, made nuisances of themselves with fireworks, and had to be kept, like a swarm of flies, from the food which the harassed housewives were getting ready. Women from the visiting contingent tried to help but were snapped at for their pains, though tomorrow they would be accused of idling while the farm's women did the work.

The party was in swing, and the garage was a bedlam.

"I do not enjoy this sort of thing," Luella Walsh said, panting and fanning herself with one small boneless hand. "I don't know why I endure it. Have you noticed that the boys are already sneaking drinks?"

Ida Heim nodded. "You could expect that."

"That's what I mean. Those who come to these parties— Well, everybody's here, and you simply can't like everybody." The soft hands folded themselves in front of the dumpy cylindrical body. "Imagine our sitting down to eat with the Vaccarellis and the Haases! I don't like them. I should think the farm could have a separate party for its department heads as it used to have. Why must we mingle with any and every one?"

"Or almost every one."

Luella followed the thought. "Well, it's hardly surprising *she's* afraid to come. Everybody's talking about your meeting her last Sunday and what happened. No wonder she's staying home."

"She went crimson," Ida said with great but quiet satisfaction. "Absolutely crimson. And then she went dead white and ran away. She didn't even try to deny what I'd called her. You can ask Steve."

"Blanche saw her a day or two ago," Luella said. "She was looking very poorly. Very poorly indeed."

"H'mph! I'm surprised she has any shame at all."

But Luella had not meant that. She said: "How long has it been since that party, Ida? Three weeks?"

Ida's head rose like an animal's at a scent. She said flatly: "Graduation was three weeks ago. That party was four."

There was a gap in which the two women looked at each other. Then

Ida released her breath. "Nature has a way of giving a jade her just deserts," she said. "I'm glad."

"Well, I might be wrong," Luella hedged. "I'm only repeating what Blanche said. . . . Look: that Pratt boy. How does he dare come either?"

"If I were Swan," Ida said, "believe me, he wouldn't have the chance. I can't imagine what the man's thinking of. If it were my daughters that boy had dared look at—much less touch—"

Ida's lips set, and Luella nodded sagely.

Ben Goetz, having introduced Clint to his wife, went off in search of food, and Sonia asked at once, "Now that you're acquainted here, Mr. Matlock, how do you like us?"

She was very fragile and lovely, with light hair misty around her head and a heart-shaped face that was delicate and fine. Clint thought he might like her personally a great deal.

"I like it a lot. The place and the people are fine, and the work runs smoothly."

"I hope you don't mean that," she said, "because it isn't so. Weyland Meadows is a mess, and I hope you're intelligent enough to see it and ambitious enough to do something about it."

He was startled, for he had thought her question merely conventional and had answered it as such; now he thought he recognized the opening gun of another battery of complaints, and he answered warily:

"No place is perfect, is it?"

She waved this aside. "Have you followed the bacteria counts at all?"

He looked at her more closely then. She was fragile and feminine, yes, but her blue eyes were unexpectedly direct, compelling. What kind of wife had the shuffling, inept Ben picked for himself? He said: "I've been fairly busy learning my own job so far. I do know they've had a few high ones."

"More than a few. And some very low ones too. That's typical. Our milk can be so good you could shout about it, or it can be plain nasty. To read our advertising or hear Ed Thomas talk, or even to look at our growth, you might think it had the highest quality in the country; but it varies unbelievably from day to day in bacteria count, butterfat, flavor, solids, everything. That high-butterfat Guernsey we boast of reaches its 4.4 or 4.5 about three days out of seven. I've known it to be as low as 3.9 and as high as 4.7 on successive days. That's not uniformity. It's the result of carelessness and too little supervision of important details."

"You sound—uh—pretty well informed."

"I used to work in the office," she said, "and I kept my eyes open. I still do, but there's not much I can do about it any more."

"If it's true, Ed must know—"

"Ed knows, but needs someone to keep after him. I used to hound him." The look he gave her must have been obvious, for she added hastily: "No, I didn't leave on that account. I left of my own accord—for a very different reason. Actually, Ed appreciates pressure. He realizes we have faults, also that he won't do much about them himself—"

"Good Lord," Clint said, "why not—if they exist?"

The woman hesitated. "I think he dreads upsetting a status quo, unsatisfactory though it is. I think he's afraid of risking a break with Steve Ochs and Charlie Dann—"

"What have they to do with it?"

"Everything. They— Oh, dear, why did we start this in the midst of a party? Here comes Ben. He thinks I'm hipped on the subject and doesn't like my talking about it, so— Why don't you come over to the house sometime, Mr. Matlock, when we can really talk? That is, if you're interested."

Ben said, "Here's a plate for you, Clint. Eat with us, huh?"

Clint was glad of the interruption which covered his brief, wary hesitation. "Thank you very much," he said, and then, with a glance at Sonia, "I'd be glad to."

He would talk and listen without taking sides, he thought, and it might be illuminating. He was avid, by now, to hear all he could about the farm.

Steve caught Thomas on the fly. "Hey, y' wanta hear sumpin funny?"

Ed said wearily: "I'd give my soul to. I've been making conversation with people I don't know till I'm sick. Is it good and dirty?"

"It ain't that kind. It's about Lorden Brothers' Dairy, and it's true. Keystone hadda bottle their milk the other day."

"They what!"

Steve grinned. "Their bottle washer broke."

"What kind was it?" Ed frowned.

"Wright. They hadda send to the factory for a part. To the Middle West. Company gave 'em swell service—sent the part by plane with someone to install it; but their plant was dead for thirty-six hours just the same, and old Lorden had to go to Keystone that he's been fighting for years and get down on his knees to beg 'em to bottle for him."

"Judas, Steve, if that's your idea of a funny story—" Emergencies in

the plant terrified Ed. "You know, the more I think about our new machine, the more I like Meyer-Dumore."

Steve's look was sardonic. "Well, you can't get a better one—but you'll pay plenty for the name. Now I got an uncle down in Tennessee; he's using a Marland and he says it's O.K. Nat Friedman's company makes it. They put their own frame on a Meyer-Dumore works, so it's practically the same machine, only cheaper."

Ed said, "I don't trust things—"

But someone outside yelled for Steve, interrupting the conversation at just the point where Steve would have wanted it interrupted if he could have planned it. That was his luck.

For some time Amos Vliet had been trying to catch Lew Barchi alone, but the little cripple was an aggressive talker and was rarely by himself. Eventually, however, the big bottler managed to achieve the casual-seeming meeting that he wanted:

"Hi, Lew, how's Labor these days?"

Barchi had been in high good humor, his strident voice jovial, his ugly face grinning; but, as always, his furious earnestness was close to the surface. He snarled now, "If guys like you'd wake up to the facts of life, it'd be better off."

"Like me?" said Amos innocently.

"You kids that been working three-four years think you know it all, and don't even see how bad you're being rooked."

"Aw, you're nuts!"

"Sure, I'm nuts! That's a swell answer. I'm nuts because I say the poor suckers of the world gotta get together to get anywhere—"

"You're nuts," Amos repeated. "A good man don't need no organization to protect him." He was egging Barchi on, but had no need to go far afield from his own beliefs to do so.

"You'll learn different, fella. Unless you're satisfied with what you are and what you got, you'll find you can't buck the bosses by yourself. A guy in our class can't get to first base alone."

"Hell, Lew! I'm no more satisfied than you are, but I don't need a gang to get me what I want. No organization ever made a man rich—unless it was one of the chisellers at the top of it. For a guy who wants to pile up dough, an organization only gets in the way."

"Gets in the way!" Barchi almost strangled.

"Sure. It's out to raise an average, ain't it? Well, an average isn't halfway to what I want."



"It's guys like you," Barchi flared, "that hold up progress, thinking of themselves all the time—"

"We do all right. Look at Steve." Amos had achieved the point now. "There's a guy who's thought of himself all his life. He started out in a plant, same as me; but he'll be manager here some day, or maybe a big shot at Eastern Dairies. He'll be something, you can bet! And he hasn't done it by getting into any organizations either."

"Oh, no?"

The two words registered sharply, but Amos went right on: "Watching Steve has taught me plenty. It's taught me a guy's out for Number One in this world and no one else, and that no one'll help him. He's got to figure the angles and trust only himself. Me, I'm an amateur still. I'd knock my grandmother over the head if I had to, but Steve—he'd skin her alive!"

Lew's anger had faded, and he was looking thoughtful. "Organizations are ways of getting what you want too," he said. "If the creamery organized and struck—for higher wages, say—wouldn't you be with 'em? That's what you want."

"The boys wouldn't do anything crazy like that."

"What's crazy about it? Hell, you're a key bunch! If you quit, what could the farm do? You can't process milk with somebody off the streets. The plant 'd be dead, and a dead plant could get the management sweating in about two hours."

"You don't know Steve, Lew. He could run the plant himself if he had to while he trained a new gang. Uh-uh! We're not asking for trouble."

"Steve might be with you."

"Getting Ed, Melius, and Eastern Dairies all down on him? Oh, no!"

"Not openly," Barchi said.

"I guess not openly!" Amos decided he had a fair idea now of what was in the wind; it was time to add the crusher. "Yeah, if there was anything in it for him, he might finagle something like that; but me—I'd stay clear of it if I could. I wouldn't trust that guy across the street with a fire alarm handy. I like him, see? He can run things, and he's taught me all I know. But how I'd steer clear of him in a deal! Before I went in, I'd get things in writing and have the paper sworn to before a judge, and I'd hire a lawyer to draw up a suit to slap on him the second he double-crossed me." He looked distantly reflective. "He's quite a guy," he said. "Quite a guy!"

Barchi did not answer. He had lost some of his talkativeness.

The party was breaking up. The sun had deserted in red anger, and the only newcomer was dusk. Those who were easily bored had already left; many more were beginning to worry lest they miss the free fireworks which were a part of the carnival in town, and there was a general movement to collect families and start. The victrola still played, people still danced, a few groups still lingered talking; but the party was virtually over, leaving behind it only a flotsam of paper plates, bags, bottles, beer cans, watermelon rinds, cigarette butts, and blown firecrackers.

Swan Ellis, the cheerful lights of the garage behind him, walked down the drive feeling tired and let down. He was not, he decided, a social creature, and he wondered why he bothered trying to be. He was grateful for the cool twilight. Overhead the sky was still pale, but an evening star was out, and dusk was heavy here on the ground.

The boarding-house door banged open as he went by, and a man's figure appeared against the yellow rectangle. Someone said, "Mary?" softly.

"Sh!" It was a quick, subdued sound; a warning. Swan had to strain his eyes to make out the girl's dim figure on the porch.

"What?" The voice was Mickey Pratt's.

"Sh! Someone's on the drive." And there was a whispering murmur.

Swan passed out of earshot, but the incident disturbed him. Mickey Pratt had been much in his mind the past month, Mickey and Freda. Now here was Mickey with some other girl—Mary. Mary who? Mary Heim? Not if Ida knew it, Swan thought; but the girl's quick caution had implied a clandestine meeting. It might be. How many girls were there in young Pratt's life, and how well did he like them? It made Swan uneasy.

He reached home and went slowly upstairs. Light around Freda's door showed she was awake, though there was no sound; and after a moment he knocked and went in.

She was propped up in bed with a book on her knees, and Swan was aware, as he had been frequently of late, of how she had changed. Her hair was tangled, not with the natural dishevelment of lying in bed, but with lack of care; its bright blondness was gone, and it was flat, lack-luster. The same lifelessness was repeated in her dull eyes, in her candle whiteness, in the unhappy sag of her colorless lips.

She asked, "How was the party?" with no edge or burnish to her voice.

"All right. The boys have gone to the fireworks with the Ochses. How about dressing and coming too? With me. You loved them last year."

But the girl shook her head.

Swan persisted. "It would do you good. You haven't been out in a long while." At her stubborn silence he sighed. "It's three weeks since graduation, Freda. I haven't pressed you to go anywhere before, but it's about time to make the break, don't you think?"

A shade of expression reached her face. "I don't want to. I'm—I'm tired. I don't want to get dressed again. Besides, I'm reading."

"Not much. Twelve pages in a week. Let's be honest, Freda. Now—"

"You might as well stop talking. I'm not going."

His impatience flickered but he controlled it.

She added, "You wanted me to be honest."

"Freda, your being cooped up here isn't healthy; you look badly now. You'll have to go out sometime, you know—and it'll be dark by the lake. I won't ask you to go near the carnival grounds or meet a soul." Again she shook her head, and he added: "I'm trying to make it easy for you, but there's a limit. If I'm to bear with you much longer, you'll have to explain what you're thinking, how you stand, what you expect to do."

"I only want to be left alone till I'm ready to meet people again."

"When will that be? And what of your health? This being shut in—"

"Lots of people spend their lives indoors."

Swan shook his head. "I don't mean physically. I mean you've crawled into a hole—and you've got to get out."

"Of course I have, but I don't want to get out. I'm happy—"

"You're not hiding because you're happy," he said. "Be honest with yourself. You're hiding because you're afraid—and there's no reason for that any more. Farm gossip never lasts three weeks, and you know it. There's no pack of wolves waiting to leap at you when you appear. People have forgotten—"

"They haven't. They're only waiting to—to—to say things—"

"You're wrong," Swan insisted.

"You're the one that's wrong. I *know*! I tried it, and I know. . . . And I'm not coming out again until I'm ready. Maybe never."

"You're imagining things, Freda." He was immensely disturbed at her attitude, and it was wearing away his careful patience. Still, they were closer to talking, to understanding each other, than they had ever been before. Realizing this, he tried again, earnestly: "If I ask you to do things, Freda, it's because I think they're for your good. You know that, don't you? And you know too, I think, that your being like this isn't normal. Don't you?"

"Maybe not," she admitted, "but I don't much care."

"I do—and I'm trying to guide you back. Guide you, Freda. Understand? I've made mistakes, but you won't be forced again, I promise."

"Then let me alone. There's nothing you can do."

"There is if you'd let me. We could talk things out, discuss what happened fully, quietly, get at what's inside of you." He let her think about it though she was shaking her head hopelessly. "I know you resent what I did to you. That's all right. I'm not asking you to change. But there must be some way I can help now. Please, Freda." This time he caught a thread of hesitation in her denial, and said quickly, "So there is! . . . Tell me."

"No."

But he was sure there was and urged her gently. He could see she was tempted, even while she shrank.

"No. You—you'd laugh. No—I don't mean that; I guess you wouldn't. But anyway I—I—just can't!" In the end he persuaded her, and, with color mounting in her cheeks, she whispered her question: "Well—maybe you'd tell me something about—about sex, daddy?"

He had not expected this, and it took him aback; he had no words to explain, and moreover a fundamental fear had been reawakened, paralyzing his tongue. Why, so belatedly, was she asking such a question? Ignorant of her session with the dictionary, of the shamed curiosity it had aroused, not knowing she had been out of the house or had encountered Ida Heim, Swan could only wonder if some sense of guilt or, worse still, some physical change had turned her mind in this direction.

He remembered Mickey Pratt and that whispering girl who had met him; Mickey knew his way around—undoubtedly. But then he recalled asking Freda if Mickey had "violated her modesty," and surely the naïve reply could not have been acting. Swan did not know which impression to believe, and doubt left his face cold with moisture, his jaw ridged.

The silence lengthened, and Freda turned suddenly, burying her crimson face in the pillows. The confidence he had worked to rebuild was being shattered by his inability to answer, but still words would not come. He could only admit it: "Freda, I want to answer, and I can't—adequately. I'll have to take you to Dr. Caron and leave it to him."

"I won't go to a doctor!"

Why not? he wondered instantly, and his worry and impatience abruptly exploded. "I've had enough," he said. "I'm through. You'll go, Freda, and there'll be no more nonsense!"

In the back of his mind was the thought that this way his doubts

might be settled once and for all. That he was breaking his promise not to force her never even occurred to him.

"Don't come any farther, Mick. I'll be all right alone."

"That's O.K. I see my girls home. Come on."

"No. Please! Let's say good night here."

"What's the idea?" Mickey Pratt said. "I couldn't call for you; I couldn't even pick you up at the garage after the party. I had to meet you outside, after dark. Now I can't take you home. What goes on?"

There was exasperation in his tone, for it had been an indifferent evening all around. He had spent more money at the carnival than he should have, and Mary Heim had been such a drag that he had long since repented the casual impulse to take her which their accidental meeting at the party and their subsequent chat had led to. The girl was funny-peculiar, and he didn't understand her a bit—or like her.

"Mother might still be up," she explained. "She doesn't know I went out with you, and she wouldn't like it. I can't go anywhere."

"What's she got against me?" Mick asked, annoyed.

"It isn't you. It's barn boys in general. Of course there was that Freda Ellis talk. Uh—did you and she really—"

"Aaaah!" he said in disgust. Good God, did she expect him to admit it if they had? And what kind of girl would ask that question anyway? "So you're ashamed to go home with me? O.K. I'll wait here."

"I'm not ashamed," Mary said quietly, "but I'll get a bawling out or maybe a licking, and I'd rather not have you around."

Mickey's stomach sank. "A licking! For just going out with me?"

"For going out without asking her."

"Jesus!" Being responsible for a girl's getting licked gave him a very odd feeling, but there was little he could do. "Well—hell—if that's the way you want it, O.K. Go on then. Gee!"

But she waited close to him. They were standing under the water tower halfway between the boarding house and the Heims'; and with the street lights hidden by the garage and the horse barn, and only a bright spray of stars overhead, it was pitch-dark. At first he thought she was afraid; then he decided she was waiting to be kissed, and he thought: To hell with it! I'm not in the mood.

But she said: "Mick— Funny how we met this afternoon. It was just here, under the tower, back of the garage. The party was going on inside, but there was only you and I out here. Remember?"

"Yeah."

"It was like fate. Why did you come outside?"

He moved uncomfortably. "I wanted to sit down. I was tired from playing ball, and the seats were all taken in there. . . . Why did you?"

She said, "I'd come out to watch the bulls."

Judas! He remembered that the two Holstein bulls and the new Guernsey sire had been out that afternoon in the bull pen back of the horse barn. But—

"What you want to watch the bulls for?" he demanded, and in the tiny silence afterward wished he hadn't.

"Oh-h, I do' know. Bulls—interest me. You have much to do with them, Mick? I see you walking them to the cow barns sometimes."

"Huh?" he said. "Oh!"—reddening. "Oh, yeah. I—I suppose."

"You ever let anybody come along to—to watch?" she asked.

Holy hell! He didn't know what to say. The girl was whacky!

He growled, "Well, I guess people don't bother the animals none."

"Well, sometime could I—"

"Aw, you're a girl, Mary. You wouldn't want to see that stuff."

"I have as much curiosity as a boy," Mary said.

He washed his hands of it. "Come, if you want. What the hell!"

Little tramp, he thought. Bet she's got all kinds of curiosity—and not just about bulls either; bet I could have her right now if I wanted. . . . But to hell with that.

"So long," he said. "See you later."

He was glad when she went without further talk. To his mind, it was good riddance.

## XIX

INEVITABLY, Luella Walsh had to see for herself if Freda Ellis looked as bad as rumor had it and, if so, whether the cause were the one at which she had hinted to Ida. If it were, Luella felt, she would know instinctively.

So, on Saturday, the second morning after the party, she discovered a shortage of lard and decided to borrow some. She kept a clump of lilac between herself and the Ellis windows until the last possible moment, hoping to take Freda unaware and give her no chance to escape; but she succeeded only in catching young Willie at the cake chest. Freda was out.

She was in town, Willie said. Yesterday she had been sent to the doctor's, but hadn't gone; today Swan had quit work to take her in person. Willie did not know why. Her stomach, maybe; she'd been off her feed.

Luella forgot her lard and her way home too, apparently. She was panting in her haste, and her dumpy body was a quiver with excitement when she reached Ida's. Soft hands fluttering helplessly, she seemed at first hardly able to talk, but she made up for that later.

The news reached Mickey Pratt during the Sunday morning milking. He was stripping the first of his string when Boo Fusek came in, grinning cheerfully as usual, and said, "Hiya, Pop!" as he passed. Mickey thought he was talking to Pop Haas, farther along, and paid no attention, but later, while Haas was in the milkhouse, Donny Ochs came by with the same crack, and this time Mickey looked up at him.

"What's the matter, Don? Need glasses?"

"Nope," Donny said, and left him puzzled.

Then, when Pop himself paused to ask if the cigars came now or later, he realized something was afoot. There were covert grins. The whole damned bunch was watching him.

"What the devil's wrong?" he demanded.

Young Donny Ochs asked, "How y' at dodging buckshot, Mick?"

"If he'd lit out a month ago," Pop said, "he'd 'a' stood a chance; but he's waited too long. He's as good as caught."

And Boo said, "Bet Swan's outside now with a big ol' blunderbuss."

"Horsewhip," Haas said. "Swan favors whippin'."

Mention of Swan raised the hair on Mick's scalp and the gooseflesh on his spine. "What the hell ya talkin' about?"

"We're congratulating you, pappy! Don't go and git mad."

"Pappy!" Mick yelled. "What—"

"Quite a thrill, hearing about your first, huh?" Haas said. "Well, they git to be routine later, so make the most of it."

Donny said, "That's always supposing it is his first. Is it, Mick?"

Mickey was dead white. With a scrabbling, hysterical movement, he got across and grabbed Donny by the front of the coverall. "You want to get punched, or you gonna tell me what this is about?"

"Sure. Why not? I got nothing to hide. Way I heard it: The Ellis girl's havin' a baby and you're elected."

"That's a goddam lie!" Mickey screamed. "It *couldn't* be true."

"Somebody oughta tell you the truth about drugstores," Donny said.

"Look—somebody—finish my string. I gotta go."

"Gotta go *some* to beat 'at ol' shotgun," Boo shouted after him.

Someone else shouted, "Look at him: he's scared white."

And a whole volley of gibes followed Pratt from the barn.

Mickey was indeed scared, for though he had not touched Freda Ellis he knew as surely as cows give milk that, if she were having a kid, he would be blamed for it. He had never been so scared before, yet he was not running away. Such an idea had never occurred to him. All he wanted was to reach Swan before Swan began looking for him.

He tried the house first since it was Sunday, and Swan was there. He came to the door in response to Willie's call, lank and slow-moving, his weathered, granite-cut face hard to read but, Mick thought, questioning. There was no indication that he was angry.

Mick stammered in his anxiety. "Mr. Ellis, I—uh—want to talk to you. M-maybe you know why. Could we—well—take a walk or something?"

Swan nodded impassively, stepping onto the porch and closing the door behind him. They walked out to the road and turned right along it, away from the farm. When they had gone some distance and the boy had found no words to begin, he prodded quietly. "What's on your mind?"

"Uh—uh—look," Mick fumbled. "I heard a story. There's a story going around about—about Freda. They're saying—well, that she and I—I mean, they're saying she's—uh—g-going to have a baby and I'm—uh—" He gave up. "It's a lie, Mr. Ellis. You got to believe that! I talked to you before, and everything I said then was true—honest! I didn't touch her. If she's—if the story's true, I'm not the one who—who's responsible. Honest, I'm not."

Swan was silent, and his face seemed even harder than before. The story was news to him, and he was thinking of its effect on Freda if she were to hear. She must not hear.

"You believe me, don't you?" Mick said earnestly.

But Swan was not thinking of the boy. Anger was growing in him. "Where'd you hear this?" he asked. "How did it start?"

"I don't know. All the barn boys seemed to know it."

"Then all the farm knows it. I suppose somebody heard she was at the doctor's." How? he wondered. Few had known where he was taking her; very few. Who had told? "When I find out who spread this—" But the threat implicit in the tone stayed unspoken.



Mickey repeated anxiously, "You believe me, don't you? You got to!"

Swan said: "The story's not true anyway. I took her to the doctor, but only for a check-up. She's run down, he said; that's all."

"Oh!" Mickey felt dizzy with relief and hollow with a sense of anticlimax and wasted effort. "Then—well—I'm sorry I bothered you. I didn't want you to get any wrong ideas about me, see? I—"

"You're all right," Swan said, and, though his manner was grudging, he meant it. He liked the boy's coming to him. Besides, there was the doctor's flat verdict to reassure him: Freda was quite unharmed. Quite. So many of his fears, Swan thought guiltily, had been in vain.

Yet not all of them were at rest. Freda was still "run down," still emotionally upset, and what this latest gossip might do to her if she heard it, who could say? No good, certainly.

So it must be kept from her. Somehow.

Freda had seen Mickey Pratt come for Swan. For an overpowering moment, sight of him had threatened to release thoughts and memories which she had securely locked up; but the habit of repression was strong, and by the time Swan, preoccupied, returned to the house, indifference had reclaimed her. She wondered briefly what Mickey had wanted, but did not care sufficiently to ask.

Later in the day, after the Sunday noon dinner, she was sent out with a blanket and some pillows to the patch of grass beside the garden, for the doctor had ordered rest, fresh air, sunshine. Freda did not care as long as she could get them within the shelter of the Ellis hedges.

Lying on her back and relaxing gradually in the comforting heat, she let her mind drift with idle, impersonal reluctance over that visit to Dr. Mat Caron. She was perversely pleased that she had puzzled him. Forced to go, she had yielded apathetically yet with a stubborn resolve to tell him nothing and ask him no questions. The physical examination had been carried to a point that startled and embarrassed her, but she had submitted sullenly, having nothing to hide. During all her waking hours, to be sure, she was conscious of a tight emptiness like hunger that faded till it was almost gone or flared till it was almost pain or lay stagnant and dull, a mere mild ache, for long stretches at a time; but she had no need to be told there was nothing physically wrong: she knew that what she felt was emotional torment transmuted into bodily pain.

So she had answered the questions put to her with sulky monosyllables and had given no hint at all of those things which really disturbed her:

the odd dreaminess of her recent world, the violent moments when black desperation seemed to reach for her, the shameful, dirty excitement with which she thought of her visit to the dictionary. The question she had asked Swan three nights ago remained unanswered too. Swan had not told Caron about it; she herself had been in no mood to ask, and the doctor, ascribing her attitude to more obvious origins, had not guessed at her need, or at the depths of her problem. She wished now, wistfully, that she had been a little more sensible.

Lying there, she had drifted close to sleep when the back-door screen banged, and she opened her eyes to find Willie looking down at her, his face streaked with tears and splotched with red. Deliberately, glaring with hot vindictiveness, he said, "I hate you!"

"What?" Freda thought she had misheard. "What, Willie?"

"I do too! I hate you." Outrage and innocence made Willie's fury bitter. "Pop whaled me, and I'm too old for that, and it's your fault!" Angry tears brimmed, and he sniffed them away.

"Mine?" Freda repeated dully. Recently, words said to her had been reaching her mind only after a lag. A soft, muffling layer of impersonality clouded things. "I don't understand. Why were you spanked?"

"Never mind. But it's your fault."

"But, Willie, I can't think of anything I did or said—"

"Never mind. How'd I know it was secret anyway? Nobody told me."

"What was secret? Willie, you're going to tell me, or else!"

"I am not. I ain't supposed to. Pop 'd whale me again if I did. He said he would. So quit asking questions."

The boy stalked off around the house, his hands in his pockets, his lower lip protruding sullenly beyond his upper. Freda called after him and was tempted to jump up and chase him; but inertia intervened—inertia, and a slow realization of what he had said, what he had meant, what it implied.

So there was more!

Momentarily, this had no emotional meaning. The incident was wrapped in a dreamlike haze which might have come from her being almost asleep when Willie came out, except that the same unreality had recently colored much of her conscious life. It was a feeling that annoyed and worried her. It was like being giddy, and had the same unpleasantly squeamish quality. When it went to extremes, the very walls of the house seemed to have no solidity, and she feared that the farm people, standing outside, could look right through them and see her. Doing her work, she felt like a pantomimist pretending; as she

made beds she felt as if she were merely going through the motions; and she was surprised when her family ate the food she had cooked, actually doubting its existence. But then, the family too seemed unreal. They came and went, moved and talked like people in a dream, and she had no feeling for them. Swan and the boys, whom she had loved, awoke no more response than Ed Thomas, and it irked and shamed her that this was so. She wished fervently she could believe in the existence of anything again, for the insubstantial feeling of moving in a trance was sickening and disagreeable.

Her mood was a quiet melancholy precariously suspended above a pit of depression. If she let herself go only a little, it seemed, she would plunge into depths that were frightening, and would lose all contact with the world. This feeling was keenest when, with the brutal force of present experiences, events of the past came bursting from the tight compartment where they were confined and she must struggle to lock them in again. At such times, black tentacles reached for her, fumbling past the misty veil which protected her emotions and baring to her eyes her own fear and humiliation.

This was happening now as realization dissipated the first apathy.

So there was more! Mickey Pratt (the connection was obvious—she never questioned it) had brought news to Swan, and Swan had spanked Willie for something that was her fault. If Mickey Pratt knew, the whole farm knew; they must be talking about her again, and once more she did not know why, or what she had done.

Would it never stop? Would they never give her peace?

A desperate hopelessness engulfed her, and bands seemed to tighten about her till she could not breathe. She wanted to hide her face and bawl.

What this time?

She could not guess, nor did she want to know. Puzzling over it would only unearth other questions which had been buried unanswered; so she must not think, she must not wonder. If she could remain in ignorance, if she could repress all thought of the past a little longer, her bitterness, resentment, and shame might fade—she might stop wanting to be alone and manage to face people again as though nothing had happened. This was her hope and her expectation, though beside it lay fear of a future which was black and murky, a future which might never be more tangible than was the present.

So she crushed back the surging past relentlessly, and in time regained her calm; but it was a somber calm underlaid with a deep, nagging, con-

stant dread. What was it they were keeping from her? The unknown weighed on her like a material burden, a solid, heavy, inert mass without the shape of a conscious problem; and gradually—there was no putting a finger on the moment—came the need to know. Knowledge might be disastrous, but ignorance was worse; it was doing things to her now.

She acknowledged this Monday after a sleepless night; but not till Tuesday noon did she nerve herself to find out.

Kenny Ihloff, the icebox man, ran the milk route which served the farm homes. Since the Ochses' party Freda had retreated from the kitchen at his approach and waited in another part of the house, leaving a note for what extras she needed: she was afraid of his clumsy kidding. But this Tuesday, when the farm pick-up slid to a stop in the drive, she merely gripped the edge of the sink with both hands and stood there, hanging on. That same kidding might tell her what she had to know.

Kenny came up on the stoop, dropped three full quarts, picked up two empties, and started away again without a glance in her direction. Freda saw the chance she had counted on vanishing, and spoke abruptly.

"Leave me a half-pint of heavy, please, Kenny."

Ihloff halted, his blank eyes peering in through the dark screen. "Hi!" he said. "Well, dash me if it ain't Freda! Ain't seen you in a hell of a while. Where y' been keepin' yourself?"

"Nowhere but here."

His eyes flicked downward and his out-of-focus face went sly. "How you feelin', huh? You don't look so hot."

"I feel fine," she said.

"I bet! . . . Well, cheer up. Pat had a hell of a time too at first, but she's startin' to feel better. You will too—later. S'long."

He hopped off the steps, and an instant later the pick-up roared, backing down the drive with spinning wheels.

Freda stood there, bewildered. He had said nothing at all! No cracks, nothing. Just that about her looks, and something about Pat. Nothing that helped.

Minutes later she remembered that Pat Ihloff was having a baby; that that had been the excuse for the Ochses' party.

But . . .

Freda fumbled for a chair and sat down rather suddenly.

A baby! . . . The doctor, she thought wildly. The examination.

And Willie. Willie had known of her visit to the doctor's. He must

have told, and now Kenny—which was to say the farm—thought she was having a baby.

But—that was silly! . . . Wasn't it?

Freda's mind whirled dizzily, and she pressed one hand hard below her breast to quiet the fluttery sensation within her.

Swan must think so too; at least he had taken her to the doctor and had spanked Willie for telling. Did he still think so? What had Mat Caron told him? What could he have, but that she wasn't?

She couldn't be . . . Could she?

But then why did everyone think she was?

With a queer, shrinking horror Freda remembered Eunice Heim lying beside her, moist and panting, whispering ugly questions about Mickey and herself and something ugly they were supposed to have done.

She remembered Ida's calling her a tart.

And the dictionary. And the words she had looked up.

She remembered that the farm women believed something of her so shameful that they had spoiled her graduation. She still did not know specifically what, but from their attitude and the sort of questions Eunice had asked it was clearly something revolting.

And now they believed she was having a baby.

The one must be the result of the other, she felt instinctively, though her half-knowledge left the connection vague.

But she couldn't be, because nothing had happened. Nothing at all!

So the unknown was with her again, and the walls which had enclosed the past were crumbling. The apathy which had protected her was gone, and she began to feel things more keenly than she had felt them since graduation night. Only she no longer cared. She could even laugh about it.

Sitting there by herself in the kitchen, Freda laughed—uncontrollably.

Swan, who was on the lookout for trouble, was the first to see the change. Pausing in the kitchen that evening to wash, he sensed an animation in Freda's movements that had been lacking for weeks, and at first took it as a hopeful sign. Then he noticed what she was doing. She would pick up a plate, carry it briskly to the stove, only to carry it back again with the same briskness, unused. She did the same thing with other dishes and utensils a half-dozen times in a few minutes.

Swan watched her so long that the girl cried suddenly: "What are you staring for? Stop it! I hate to be stared at."

"I was thinking," he lied, "how good dinner smelled."

"You weren't. You were watching me." She worked as she talked, but her movements became even more purposeless. "You were spying on me." He turned to go, but she cried after him, "This is mine, this part of the house. You keep out. It's my castle, my fort." There was a flicker behind her eyes, and Swan thought of a cog slipping. She said, "Cooking's my forte."

He smiled as though she had dragged the unfamiliar word in for the sake of a pun, but he doubted it. And she made no response.

At supper he watched her closely. Everything was good, except that she had forgotten to salt the potatoes. She served the meal without her recent listlessness, and talked quite freely. He thought she rambled and was occasionally incoherent; but the boys and Ed Thomas responded to her mood, not seeming to notice, and the meal was the gayest in weeks.

However, she failed to join them in the living room after the dishes were done. Swan heard her go upstairs and after a while rose and went up too, pausing at her door to rap. There was no answer, and it did not give.

On the other side of the panel, the girl laughed at him.

"Freda." He repeated the name twice, but her laughter only swelled.

It sounded like hysterics, but it broke suddenly, and she said: "You can't come in. Nobody can come in. This is my room, and I'm going to keep it locked." She repeated the word: "Locked. . . . Locked in."

"I want to talk to you, Freda. Open the door."

"I don't want you in here. Besides, I haven't any clothes on."

"Put some on. I want to talk to you."

"No. You want to whip me. Like before. Well, you can't."

"I don't. I won't. That other was a mistake." There was silence. "Freda? Freda, open the door."

"I don't trust you. You don't keep your word." Few people could truthfully have said that to Swan Ellis; but Freda was one of them, and he knew it. "Go away," she said. "Leave me alone."

Later, on his way to bed, he tried her door again gently, but it was still locked. His sleep was troubled.

Wednesday was fine and hot after a night of thundershowers, and Swan—easier in his mind because Freda, at breakfast, had seemed less flighty—hoped it presaged a stretch of good weather. It was time for haying, though the stand this year was late and not too good, after a cold spring. About eleven o'clock, when the earth had dried, he got the

tractor out and started cutting; he was making the turn at the far end of the field the second time when he noticed Carroll waiting for him back near the road. The boy wanted a ride.

"What's wrong," Swan asked, helping him aboard. "Thought you and the Ochs boys had something on for today. What was it? What happened?"

"Aw-w-w!"

"What does that mean?"

"Nothin'. I just didn't feel like going. They were teasing too much."

"Can't you tease back? . . . What were they teasing about, anyway?"

"Aw—nothing much." But Swan's expectant silence forced the boy to add reluctantly, "Freda—sort of."

"So?" Swan said gently. "What did they say?"

"Oh—that she wasn't—nice. That she'd done something she oughtn't. Things like that. I don't like 'em any more."

"That's right, son. Don't believe 'em either. They're lying. Freda's as fine a sister as any boy could have."

"Yeah. But she acts funny sometimes, don't she?"

"Make allowances. She's not feeling so well."

"Yeah, but does she have to yell at me? I come home from the Ochses' an' for no reason she starts hollering. I wasn't even near her!"

"What did you do? Mess up a room she'd just cleaned—"

"I didn't do a thing. She was in the kitchen, an' I was in the living room, an' all of a sudden she hollers. Says I was imitating Mrs. Heim's voice, and I wasn't at all. I was just talking to myself."

The tractor jolted down the field, made the turn at the corner, while Carroll, with fascination, watched the grass collapsing mysteriously over the hidden cutting bar. Finally Swan said:

"What were you doing? Playing? Pretending? Perhaps—"

"Huh? Pretending? Oh! Oh, that! Naw, I was just talking to myself."

When they completed the circle Swan muttered, "Climb down."

Carroll recognized the tone and obeyed, though he had hoped to ride around at least once more. He watched his father clatter away, then started moodily down the road, kicking a stone ahead of him. Something he had said had made the old man mad.

At noon, Swan spoke to Freda. "Carroll bother you this morning? He said you yelled at him, so I suppose he made a nuisance of himself?"

"Didn't he say why I yelled?" Freda demanded defensively.

"I couldn't get it straight. Something about Mrs. Heim."

"He was imitating her. He was sitting in the living room saying things in her voice. He was teasing me."

"If he was, I'll punish him. You'd better tell me exactly what he said."

She started to answer. Her lips formed the words, but no words came. A look passed across her face—secretive, he thought; but then her eyes were blank and staring as though she had forgotten what she meant to say. An instant later they were aflame with a sudden, unaccountable passion. "Oh, don't bother! What does it matter? I don't care. Only—if he does it again, I'll—I'll—I'll hurt him!"

Swan nodded and moved on. There was no point in disturbing her.

The afternoon, hot and work-filled, passed uneasily for Swan. Restless as he was to return home, he did his job with his usual thoroughness, finishing everything that had to be done before quitting. At the house there was nothing new, after all, to disturb him.

Ed Thomas said as they left the table that night: "Got over it, hasn't she? Last few days she's been quite cheerful. I'm glad."

"I hope you're right," Swan answered.

Yet she went to her room again when the dishes were done, and this worried him. He hated to see her too much in her own company.

Thursday was overcast, and at noon a half-hour deluge soaked his hay. The high, solid clouds refused to clear afterward, and with his whole cutting in danger from the warm dampness, he was a depressed and angry man. He came home, soaked and tired, fully expecting more worries to be awaiting him, but was pleasantly disappointed.

That evening Freda, of her own accord, joined them in the living room, and for the first time in a miserable twenty-eight hours Swan drew a breath of relief. He had been right in waiting, he thought; perhaps, after all, she could make her own adjustments.

But she was restless. She fiddled with the radio and looked at the papers, but neither held her. She played rummy with Willie and Ed Thomas, but only a hand or two. After that the others began settling down—Swan with his paper, Thomas with the blueprints of the new creamery, and Carroll, very quiet indeed lest he be noticed and sent to bed, with a book of funnies. Only Freda remained astir. She leafed through a magazine and tossed it away. She walked to the window to watch the sunset. She tried the radio again, only to turn it off quickly.

"Why are you all so quiet?" she cried suddenly. "Other nights, when I'm not here, you aren't. I sit upstairs and hear you talking and laughing; but when I come down you suddenly shut up. Why?"



"Do we?" Swan lowered his paper. "I guess we were busy reading."

"Why? You talk about me when I'm not here, don't you? Laugh at me? But now you're afraid to say what you're thinking!"

"We don't talk or think about you particularly, as far as I know. Why should we?"

"You know why. You're thinking nasty things right now. Why not be honest? Say them out!"

Ed Thomas said: "Speaking for myself, I was thinking that, theoretically, we need a laboratory in the new creamery, but that, practically, we couldn't afford to run one. That's what was in my mind—"

"I don't believe you."

"Freda!"

"Well, I don't! If you all aren't thinking about me, why are you so quiet? You sit watching me from behind your papers. I can feel you—"

"Now wait! Let's not get excited—"

*"Then stop it!"*

Her ferocity shocked them. The house rang with it, and the girl herself looked uncomfortable.

Swan broke the embarrassed silence. "You'd better go upstairs."

"And have you laugh as soon as my back's turned?"

"It's hardly a laughing matter."

She said: "I—I didn't mean to yell. I couldn't help it. I'm sorry."

"All right. Stay, then, if you can control yourself. We can talk—"

Thomas said: "It's still early. Suppose we all go to a movie."

"Oh, boy!" Willie cried. "Let's!"

But Freda said: "You're making up things to amuse me, and I don't want to be amused! Just stop watching me, stop staring at me, stop sitting there without saying anything, thinking about me."

"Aw, who's thinking about you?" Willie jeered. "Who'd want to?"

"You boys go to bed," Swan rapped.

"Oh, let them stare and point! They've as much right as you."

"None of us are staring or pointing, Freda. Now—"

"You are! Of course you are! You think I'm—I'm—" Her breath caught, and she whirled. "*Don't you dare!*" Her voice was almost a scream as she turned on Carroll, who was starting to plead for the movie. "Don't you dare start that again."

"Huh?" Carroll said.

"That's what he was doing yesterday," she cried. "He did it then, the same as before. You heard him. He imitated Mrs. Heim's voice."

"Did he?" Swan said carefully.

"I did not!" Carroll denied. "I didn't do anything."

"Didn't you hear?" Freda asked blankly. "Are you deaf or—or—" Her face, flushed and tearful, broke up in sudden fright.

"Take it easy." Swan did not know what to do. He glanced at Ed Thomas and saw his astonishment and disbelief.

"I did not!" Carroll repeated, sounding awed and frightened.

"There! He did it again. You heard him that time. I don't have to stand for this. Make him stop—or I will!"

Before Swan could reach her, she had struck the boy a fierce, open-handed blow. She cried: "Now stop! Stop talking like that old woman!"

Carroll began to wail in fright and pain.

Swan tried to hold her, but she tore loose, sobbing. "Keep your hands off me! I hate you all."

"We're going upstairs," Swan said. "You're excited."

"No! I won't!" Her voice rose out of control. "Why should I be punished for what—"

Swan's voice was abrupt with anxiety. "Keep still, or I'll slap you. You're not going to be punished."

She backed away, face and body contorted, fists clenched. A mass of hair had fallen across her face. She was crying, and her words emerged half intelligibly from a bay of sound: "Don't touch me! I hate you. You're mean, cruel. You don't even try to understand. I'm not what you think. I'm not what they're all saying. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not!"

She fought him wildly, but was no match for his wiriness. He pinioned her flailing arms, picked her up kicking and screaming and carried her toward the stairs. He was aware of Thomas and the boys watching, and Ed asked belatedly, "Can I help with her?"

Swan shook his head. He carried the girl to her room and put her down on the bed. Because the paroxysm had passed and she was quiet now, he stood above her crumpled form wondering whether to call the doctor now or in the morning.

Presently the shuddering aftereffects of crying stopped too, and she fumbled for a handkerchief, asking in a husky whisper, "Didn't he say anything—honestly?"

"No."

"But I heard him! In Ida's voice. . . . Or was Ida there? Did she come in while I wasn't looking—"

"She wasn't there."

"Well then—" A queer expression came over her face. "But I heard it! I'm—not—not—"

"Your imagination's playing you tricks," Swan said. "That's all."

"But—but if I can hear things that aren't there—why—something's not right. Something's wrong. I'm not—"

"You *imagined* it, Freda! You're perfectly all right. Just excited."

"Oh, daddy, if you'd only punished me!"

"What?" he asked. "Punished you? Why? When? What for?"

"For drinking and—and all. Oh, if you'd only—"

"It wouldn't have changed anything."

"Yes, it would. Always before when I was bad, you—you sent me to my room or—or forbade me something I wanted. And then it was over. All over! This time you didn't. You didn't even scold and—and—it's gone on and on ever since. It won't stop. It gets worse."

"Your own shame was punishment enough, Freda. No more was needed."

"Perhaps if you punished me now it would stop."

"Don't be foolish."

"You don't understand. They think I'm having a baby, don't they? Well, soon it'll be something else—worse. And it'll go on and on, worse all the time, until I am punished. Then, perhaps, it'll stop."

"You've been punished enough," he repeated.

She turned away and lay still. After a while he left her.

He still had no idea what she was feeling or thinking. . . .

Providentially, he was still awake when, that same night, Freda slipped into the bathroom and poured iodine down her throat.

That Swan had taken a day off was common knowledge by Friday night and was the cause of some surprise. His record for regularity during fifteen years at the dairy was such that an abrupt absence was noticed. The office knew what had happened, but the rest of the farm was left to speculate.

Ida Heim had been speculating ever since dinner, and Clint Matlock was beginning to wonder how she could be taken down a peg when there was a rap on the door. Evening visitors at the Heims' were infrequent, and before they recovered from the surprise the door opened to admit Swan himself.

He looked tired and swayed slightly. His shoulders sagged, and his head had a weary forward thrust as he came slowly in, steadying himself on the back of a chair.

Adrian jumped up. "Well, Swan! Come in. Glad to see you. Here, sit down. You look pooped."

Swan said stiffly: "Only staying a minute. Came to see Ida."

Mrs. Heim looked flustered. "Why, what— This is certainly an unexpected pleasure; it's been so long since— We were talking of you."

The muscles in the thin cheeks bulged and set. Clint, guessing what was coming, wished he could get out of the room; but there was no way.

"Yes," the man said. "You would be." He looked at Adrian. "I am tired. I haven't slept in thirty-six—almost forty—hours." He paused. "I've come from the hospital."

The utter dispassion of his voice might have been weariness; but Clint took it for glacial anger, and felt the sweat start.

"Hospital?" Ida repeated. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Freda's going to be all right. They've been working with her since morning, but they say she'll pull through."

"Freda—in the hospital! But what's wrong? Not—"

"Not what?"

Ida failed to answer.

"No. There was never an outside possibility of what you're thinking—*except in your own dirty mind.*"

"We-ell!"

He told her what had happened. "She's alive because I was awake. Alive, yes—but what she went through will be nothing to what you'll suffer if there's any justice in this world or the next." His tone remained muted in spite of what he was saying.

"Well! What have I to do with it?" Ida bridled.

"What she did, she was driven to by you and your friends."

"Is it my fault if a guilty conscience—"

"No!" Swan said, and his anger throbbed to the surface. "No, no, no!" He struck the back of the chair, then clutched it so hard that his knuckles went white. An instant later he had control of himself. "Wasn't a guilty conscience. All she was guilty of was drinking too much. No more. What she did was because"—he fumbled for words—"because she couldn't stand being talked about any longer. She got it into her head the talking wouldn't stop till there'd been—some kind of physical punishment. All right. She's been punished. Now it's going to stop."

Clint shook his head involuntarily. Swan might tongue-lash the woman till all his bitterness was spent; but to keep her from talking—Even in his anger, he should know better than to try.

Ida smiled tightly. "No doubt she felt the need of punishment."

Swan said, "I could take you to the doctor—he'd tell you she's a virgin. But I won't. You'll take my word."

Ida's mouth made disconcerted little motions. "If that's true—" "If?"

She sniffed stubbornly. "I can have my own opinions."

"It's your mind. Fill it with dirt if you want. But—"

Ida cried, "I don't have to listen to this! Adrian—"

"—keep it to yourself," Swan finished, and the words rolled more easily now, though still dispassionately. "You're twisted, Ida. You have to be, to believe the worst of another person first off. You have to be, to live for other people's private affairs. You have to be, to figure you're righteous simply because you can guess at the sins of your neighbors. I don't know what you've missed in your own life—"

"Stop it! I won't listen. Adrian—please!"

"Well, skip that," Swan said evenly. "Get a kick out of your second-hand adventures. Go on thinking yourself pure, white, and holy if you can. But, by God, stop spreading your dirty-mindedness around this farm!"

"Get out of here," Ida said, "and don't dare come back! Get out."

"I'll have no more talk about the Ellises from you or your friends," Swan said. "If I hear that Freda, the boys, or myself have been mentioned by any of you in any way, I'll be back."

He would never make it stick after insulting her to her face, Clint thought wearily. Ida might be speechless now, but no threat which could feasibly be carried out could prevent her wreaking her wrath on Freda when she recovered.

Swan said: "Understand me, Ida? If I hear one more word about any of us—and you'll answer for every other man and woman on the place—I'll handle you as I would any other child who needs to be broken of a bad habit. I'll be over here to take you across my knee in the presence of your whole family—as often as is necessary."

Watching the woman's face, Clint knew that the threat was not inadequate. If there was one thing Ida could not stand, it was humiliation before her own.

## PART II

### I

"HELLO, Isaac. Glad you came out," Ed Thomas said. "We've been looking over your barns, checking on what the inspector wanted fixed up three weeks ago. You haven't done much."

"So much else I gotta do, I ain't had time," Ledmuller grumbled. "Milking, feeding, route-running, farming, my tea shop—"

"You were to move that manure pile first. It's so close to your milk-house it's practically in it. It's above your water supply too. If it's still there when the inspector gets back, he'll cut you off short."

Ledmuller shrugged. "I moved some. What could I do with no help?"

"You were told to clean this barn, and you haven't. You were to pierce the walls for windows too, and to whitewash the inside."

"Please! When did I have time, eh?"

Wharton Pettitt emerged from the milk room holding a pail and a dipper gingerly. "You haven't even had time to turn the steam on these, have you, Isaac? Look at 'em: filthy."

"And look at that bedding," Ed added. "Isaac, the last thing I want is to get tough, but you'll have us in trouble running your place like this. Get it fixed up, or we'll cut you off ourselves."

"We ought to anyway," Pettitt said, speaking his mind on Ed's policies.

Ledmuller's soft eyes were reproachful. "Can I do it alone? Can I hire help when I'm broke? And if I don't sell my milk, can I ever pay what I owe? Huh? . . . Can I?"

"The day we cut you off, we'll take steps to collect. Remember that. I'm asking nothing I don't ask of every producer, Isaac, but I am asking as much. Still, if you feel this way, let's call it quits."

"Did I say I wouldn't try? Tomorrow I'll spend on the manure sure."

"Tomorrow, the next day, and the day after—till it's moved!" Thomas stated. "I'll be back to see you've done it."

"You wouldn't trust me, huh? O.K. So if that's all you came for—"

"It'd be enough if it was, but— Let's go to the house, and we'll buy lunch. We can talk while we eat."

Shrugging, Isaac led them from the dark, cobwebby barns across a yard littered with pieces of harness, bits of planking, rotted iron, and broken tools. The ground itself was torn and soggy; fluid lay stagnant in every hoof print though it had not rained in days, and Thomas and Pettitt picked their way with care.

Nudging Ed's attention to some old rusted milk cans lying in the grass, Whart said: "I'd make him get rid of those. He'd use one rather than go looking for one that's clean." And it was no joke.

Ignoring the open garbage can which some animal had been investigating by the back door, they went around to the front steps. Isaac's restaurant, the Rose Tea Shoppe, occupied the ground floor of a fine old house which still had dignity despite a red neon sign, lack of paint, disfiguring additions, and the general air of negligence and untidiness which surrounded it. The all-too-near cluster of barns with their sagging roofs, slanting silos, and tired weathered-gray walls made a sorry background for what might have been a handsome old pile.

Inside, they took a table on the porch overlooking the road.

"Business doesn't look so hot," Pettitt said with a meaning glance around. "Surprised anyone's here, considering the smell of the barns."

"The wind's bad today," the producer said. "Now what you want? It's not to insult me only, you come so far?"

"No," Thomas admitted. "Early last month we had a talk, Isaac. I wanted to buy your retail route, but you turned me down. Now I've another proposition—and don't say No till you've heard it."

Isaac, already shaking his head, shrugged. "O.K. Say it."

"You've one route, haven't you? Entirely within the city, but somewhat scattered, right? Now—how many quarts does it put out?"

Ledmuller shuffled, hitching his chair around. Finally he said, "It's a good full route, but whose business is it—"

"Now, Isaac!"

"O.K. You could find out easy, I guess. Three hundred ten-twenty quarts a day, maybe two-seventy customers. Extras I don't bother with."

"How are collections? And what's the outstanding?"

Ledmuller's face was bleak. "Collections—ai! The outstanding?" A shrug. "Well—not so much. Maybe a thousand, eleven hundred." Reading their minds, he added defensively, "Such a lot of it's dead."

"All right. Here's the offer: if you won't sell, will you lease?"

"Lease? A milk route? I never heard of it."

"Why not? We'd process for you, using your bottles and caps but our milk. We'd buy your equipment including bottles, caps, and cases; we'd

supply replacements, and when the route was turned back to you, you could have what was left, free. Title, good will, even name, would remain yours. So would the present outstanding, less the driver's commission if he collected any of it. Any outstanding we accumulated would be ours on the same terms, and we'd guarantee to return the route no smaller than we take it over. If it grows, you'll get the benefit. For such a lease for a year, we'd cancel your bill with us."

Petitt made a sour face, perhaps over the proposition, perhaps over the fly-specked menu, but Ledmuller looked surprised and thoughtful.

"You'd gamble the profits for a year should cover my bill plus processing-and-delivery costs? I'd be honest with you: it won't."

"It ought to, properly run. But I'm hoping, Isaac, that at year's end you'll let us go on running it. A split of the profit would give you a nice income every month without a stroke of work and time, too, to make something of this place as a producing farm. Part of our agreement, of course, would be to continue buying your milk as at present—at A prices. . . . How does it sound?"

"Good," Ledmuller said. "There must be a catch." He was silent a long while, his gentle eyes sad in his predatory face. The man was a misfit, Ed thought, and no amount of effort would make a producer of him; he had mischosen his life, which was not to say he took no pride in it.

"Well?" the manager asked finally. "What d'you say?"

The other sighed. "No. I couldn't do it. A man's got self-respect. Admitting I couldn't run my own route wouldn't be good for me."

"My proposition's fair, isn't it? Whart thinks it's too fair!"

"I jus' don't want to lease the route."

"Or pay your bills," Ed snapped, annoyed beyond caution.

Ledmuller shook his head. "That ain't so. I'll pay when I can. Only it's my retail route makes me money. On the tea shop I lose. On my wholesale milk I barely break even sometimes. Without my route—"

"You'd live better," Ed broke in. "You scatter your efforts, Isaac. Give up a few irons—the route, the tea shop—concentrate on wholesale milk, and you'd make money. Other farmers do."

"Did I esk advice? or offer any on how to run Weyland Meadows?"

Their food arrived, and Isaac made it an excuse to leave them.

Wharton Petitt, watching Thomas fume, smiled with quiet scorn. He had said the offer would not be taken.

They finished their lunch, paid the check, and were standing outside waiting to cross the road to their car when a battered pick-up full of empty cases bounced off the highway and drew up near the Ledmuller



back door. On impulse Thomas turned and walked back to where the driver was easing himself out of the cab. He was a fat man with a large smooth face on which all the tiny features—eyes, nose, and mouth—were shoved far to the front.

"You're Isaac's route man?" Ed asked. "I've been talking to him. I'm Thomas of Weyland Meadows, and I'm trying to buy him out. He tells me you deliver three-hundred-odd quarts, but there aren't that many cases in back of this truck."

"He talks," the driver said. "There's twenty-one, two cases there."

"H'm. I see. And what's the outstanding?"

"Around fifteen hundred. He's got some deadbeats."

Thomas whistled. "He must have, with fifteen hundred out on a two-hundred-and-fifty-quart route! What's the matter? Cheap-skate bunch?"

"Naw, most of 'em's good customers, only they get mad at all the sour milk and stuff. Isaac won't allow anything for it, and they won't pay for it, so the outstanding shoots up."

"How do you hang onto 'em?"

"By hard work. They're mostly friends of mine."

"Friends of yours, h'm? . . . I see. . . . How do you feel about Isaac?"

The other hesitated. Then, "He's no pal of mine."

"You paid on commission? What's your name, by the way?"

"Dunty. Hack Dunty. Yeah—eight per cent when I get it."

"Been a milkman long? Worked for any company bigger than this?"

There was a trace of hesitation before Dunty said, "Nope."

"Like to? We pay eleven." Dunty asserted he would, and Thomas nodded. "Well, I might be seeing you, Hack."

He moved away, and with Pettit, who had been at his elbow, walked in reflective silence toward the car. He said presently, "I wonder, Whart, if you're thinking what I am."

Pettit growled: "If I am, forget it! The route's in too poor shape, and you can't trust Dunty anyway. He's unscrupulous and disloyal. I don't like his face. Besides, Ledmuller 'd be mean to monkey with. He wouldn't forgive or forget, and he'd find a way to get even if it killed him."

"But I'm tired of fooling with him," Thomas said.

"I'M NOT crazy about the people here myself," Clint said. "But the fundamental question's rather, What made them this way?"

Sonia answered: "Has anything? It's just what they are: a low-mentality lot with morbidly narrow lives, without the education, background, or vision to look beyond the day after tomorrow."

"You're reminiscent of Ed Thomas. He talks of 'inbredness.' You both have to attribute abnormality to the farm to account for what it is."

She considered that. "Well, don't you?"

He was talking too much, he knew, but they had drifted into this, and now it was hard to draw a line. He had tried to break it up when Ben had retired ("He doesn't want people talking down here while he's trying to sleep"), but Sonia had said a shade grimly, "When Ben tries to sleep, not even people in the same room can stop him," and they were still at it.

Surprisingly, she seemed to enjoy it. There was nothing in her frail, wispy loveliness to suggest an interest in serious problems, but he found her educated, with some very definite opinions of her own, and capable of both thinking and articulating. The news that Freda Ellis was back from the hospital had started her on the farm's people rather than its milk, which she had proposed, at the Fourth of July party, to talk about; but to Clint, with his growing interest in Weyland Meadows, this was absorbing enough. Too absorbing, for he had given it a lot of thought and was now tempted to air some of his theories for her benefit.

He said: "I may be crazy. I haven't been here long enough to be sure, but I think you have the cart before the horse: that the abnormality didn't create the state of things, but vice versa; that people here are what conditions made them. Take the kids: the Ellis boys, the Ochs youngsters, the Vaccarelli children, Carly Groce's little girl, the rest. Bright and lively, every one of them. I like kids, and I've got acquainted. There isn't one you'd call subnormal, and those at school are making at least average records. Now you don't get average kids from abnormal or subnormal parents."

"But the parents are queer," Sonia insisted. "You've seen them!"

"Ask at what point the queerness develops. Then look at the farm's adolescents: at Freda, the Heim girls—"

"But there are specific reasons there: Ida; Swan; the—the—"

"The farm?" Clint said. "Yes. The people they've lived with. The

place where they've lived. Surroundings. Not inborn defect. See what I mean? The kids are all right, but they're affected as they get to an impressionable age. Well, I say everyone here was once 'all right' too, intelligent in an average way, and nice in the sense that their kids are: not gentlemanly or mannered, but decent. I say it's the farm's fault if they still aren't."

"Why say that? What's the farm done?"

"Crushed them."

"Oh, nonsense. It hasn't. In fact, it hasn't the power."

"I think it has," Clint said. "It's made them unhappy. I don't know what happiness is exactly. People want certain things, great or small, simple or complex, material or spiritual, and if they have them, or have the believable promise of getting them, they're happy. The believable promise—yes. It must be believable. . . . Now I don't pretend to know what people here yearn for, but—well—say they want their houses repaired. Ida's said so much about that since Adrian finished the maternity barn and was set to painting the creamery instead of repairing that it leaps to mind."

"I don't blame her. The houses certainly do need caring for!" Sonia said. "They need painting. Boards are loose, windows broken, roofs leaking. The plumbing, the heating, the wiring, the fixtures are all old-fashioned and in bad condition. Just look at this room, Clint—"

Clint grinned. "All right. So the farm wants its houses fixed, and it's a justified desire. Fixing them would make a lot of people happy—"

"Temporarily."

"Oh, sure. A hope fulfilled means raising the sights to more distant targets. That's the catch. But hope deferred prevents it. Thomas complains of our narrowed horizons, but how can a person hope for the world and the fullness thereof when he can't even get a board on his porch fixed? That's a superficial example; but most of the farm's wants, great and small, are frustrated in the same way. So what happens? People try to quit thinking about their own disappointments by taking an abnormal interest in other people's business."

"I'm afraid people are what they are," Sonia said, "and a first-class interior-decorating job is not going to persuade my neighbors, the Vaccarellis, to keep their place one bit less like a pigpen. They simply would not know how to take care of it."

"It'd take far less than that to make Marc Vaccarelli happy. Just fix his porch; let him get his eyes off the floor. Of course that's when the trouble starts. Soon he'll find he needs something more. He gets that."

Then he wants something else—and gets that. It's like the locusts and the granary in the old children's story. It could go on indefinitely."

"In other words, he acquires the 'gimmes.'"

"If he does the course under par, perhaps, but the same development over a space of months and years could be, not 'gimmes,' but growth. He still might not want interior decorating; but with encouragement he could learn to take pride in a neat, clean, simple bungalow. That'd be a widening of his horizon—and the process could go further. Of course at some point comes a desire for more money, as an end or a means to an end. That means a raise. Grant him that, and soon he wants another, or shorter hours, or security of some kind involving concessions from his boss. In the meantime his developing character has led him to think about his place in the world, to identify Capital and Labor, and discover he's part of a Labor Problem. Presently he and some of his friends recognize their collective strength, and then it's only a question of time before he tangles with Management head on."

"Is this still Marc Vaccarelli, who wanted his porch fixed?"

Clint grinned. "The same. The transformation has taken time, but I'm afraid it's inevitable, given time and given a start. . . . And Management, knowing it is, hates like the devil to fix that porch! . . . You see what I mean? I said the dairy was keeping its employees crushed, and it is. It isn't letting them start a parade that might be impossible to stop. It isn't letting them get their noses out of the dirt."

"No," Sonia said. "Not deliberately. I'm sure Ed wouldn't—"

"Perhaps not deliberately, not consciously. But he has the Management Instinct. He senses what Wharton Petitt says aloud: that, if you start granting favors, you'll never be able to stop. Ed gives as little as he can, not from any farsighted plan to avoid trouble, but simply because he's afraid to move the stone that might start an avalanche of petty requests. Of course that has the same ultimate effect."

But Sonia was inclined to disagree, and the argument grew warm and lengthy.

### III

DURING the last week of July the farm sweltered in the stifling humidity of a record heat wave, first of the summer; but it broke at last amid thunder and lightning, and August arrived bright, windy, and a little cool. The farm paid on the 2nd, and Mickey Pratt, spending part of his check for beer, went to call on the Danns.

"Bet you want to talk about Donny Ochs," Charlie said.

Mickey could think of no reason for talking about Donny, but Dann seemed barely able to wait while the younger man helped Roxy get some cheese and crackers together to go with the beer. It was clear he had something on his mind.

"Bet he's been giving you orders too," he said.

"Who? Donny?"

"The stinker! He's begun ordering everybody around. I caught Boo sweeping the feed room today because he'd said to."

"Well, it needed it," Pratt said, rather bewildered.

"But what right's he got ordering my men around? He's not boss of the barns. Not yet, anyway! He's only a green hand."

"Aw, you know Boo. Always does things for guys at a hint."

"This was no hint! And he's done it before. Pop Haas, Dick, they all been doing things he told 'em to. You too, I bet."

"Couple times he pointed out things to be done, but—"

Roxy said: "Now, Charlie—gee! Calm down. You get so excited."

"All right, but he's been messing around with the record books, and he was talking with the fella from the State Farm about feeding. He's learning everything about cows as fast as he can. You know why? Because Steve told him to! Steve's going to make himself manager of Weyland Meadows. Then he'll put Larry in charge of the plant and Donny in charge of the barns, and toss me out on my ear. I got a right to be excited."

He was cockeyed, Mick thought. Steve took care of his family, sure; but the idea of putting Larry in charge of anything—Ha! Besides, a plot like that was something you dreamed about, not what actually happened. Life, for Mick, passed on a simple level, and machinations were beyond his understanding.

Roxy asked, "Is Donny the handsome dark boy I've seen around?"

"He looks like Steve," Pratt said, "only taller and not so dark and not so hard-looking. He's a nice kid, I always thought. I like him."

"You can stay out of my house, then," Charlie said.

"Aw, you always go whacky when the Ochses are mentioned."

"You'll find out why when Steve's our boss."

Mickey laughed. "He'll have to kick Thomas out first, remember."

"Maybe that wouldn't be hard. Ed ain't doing so damned hot."

"What do you mean? The farm's booming."

Charlie answered with a meaning look which Mick discounted. The boss was in a low mood and believing what he dreaded to believe.

"Anyway, Steve might not get to be manager if Ed did go. You or Swan Ellis might get it on seniority. You been here longest of anybody."

"So what? When Wycoff left, didn't Thomas move up? It's a young man's day. The young ones and the tough ones get the breaks now."

"Maybe this time," Roxy said wistfully, "it'll be different."

Charlie pumped up a little gloomy hope. "Maybe—but against Steve and Swan what chance 've I got? Steve's young. He's unscrupulous. He's been doing a key job, and he's got fight left. Swan's always run his own department, and they trust him even to sign farm checks. Me—" The voice trailed off bitterly.

Mick said: "You're cockeyed as hell, Charlie. You're a good manager. You certainly been good to me!" But that was no help because he knew why, suddenly: he was no rival to Charlie's ambitions. Now that he thought of it, Charlie had never let anyone who was too good work long in the barns—anyone but Donny, who had strong connections.

Dann said morosely: "We're in the wrong end of this business, you and me, Mick. Production don't count any more. All my life I've spent with cows; I've handled some of the finest thoroughbred strains, and haven't let 'em suffer either. We had the Carnation line at the first place I worked, and the Ormsby line here. I was even developing a Weyland line that might have been as famous as either some day, but—" He stopped as his voice shook. "Where has it got me? I'm old already, my career's behind me, I got no friends or money or—"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Mickey said, embarrassed.

Charlie sighed. "I tell you, this place used to be a model dairy. We didn't put out much milk, and we lost money, but we had a herd we were proud of, and what milk we did sell cost twenty-five cents a quart and was worth it. It was baby-milk. . . . A production man was somebody then. If he was good, he could get to be manager, even—and I was. Did I ever show you the records we made here? We had some good cows then. Good cows!"

Animation had lifted his voice, but it died slowly. "Now we milk by machine, and half the time don't know what individual cows produce. Our thoroughbred herd's shot through with grade cows, and you know what they're talking about next? Out West they've developed a new kind of high-producing herd. Not thoroughbred, not even grade, but hybrid!"

Mick was beyond his depth. "Well, if it produces—"

"Yes, if it produces! . . . There's no pride left. What do they care

about the great strains? All they want now is a herd that produces! Milk, milk, more milk. The day of the dairyman's gone, Mick. Ed Thomas couldn't milk a cow; but he can sell milk, so he's manager. I can't and couldn't, so I'll never be." He chewed over the last words glumly before maundering on: "We're at a dead end, Mickey, here in the production end. Production's no longer a step up in the dairy business. You still have to have someone to take care of the cows—oh, yes. But what do you have to know? Nothing! The universities turn out your feeding formulae—and put stuff in 'em you'd laugh at. They give you blueprints to build your barns with, and instructions on everything down to breeding itself. All a production man has to know now is how to keep a barn clean, and the sales-and-advertising department can help him with that! Any goddam fool with a pamphlet can make milk. Even Donny Ochs—not that it'll get him anywhere, thank God."

Mick found nothing to say. This was where ambition got you, he thought: you wanted something bad, the breaks went against you, and then life turned sour and wasn't fun any more. None of that for him! Today, tomorrow, that was far enough to look ahead.

He was sorry for Charlie and Roxy, though; they were lonely people.

He found the older man looking at him, and jumped. Charlie said: "There's no future in the barns, Mick. You oughta get out. It's all right to drift awhile, while you're young; but time passes. A fella your age ought to have plans. You're wasting time here. To get anywhere, you have to start early and fight hard."

"Yeah." Mick couldn't say what he had been thinking a minute ago about ambition, but Charlie must have sensed it, for his eyes suddenly fell. The younger man was sorry for him.

And then he wondered oddly what he would be at that age.

As useless, old, broken as Charlie? Would he be better off as to job or money? Or worse—having no goal to fight for, no star?

Disconcerting questions for one who thought of the future as little as Mick did. He thrust them away rather hastily.

## IV

STEVE cried, "Hey, Barchi! Hear you had a drivers' meeting!"

Barchi stopped his truck behind the others outside the garage and leaned out of it. "You bastard!" he said with conviction. "You sonofabitch!"

Steve's laugh emerged as a thin, high chuckle, but it convulsed his whole body. Barchi kept swearing, and Steve doubled up, slapping his knee. "Oh, Christ!" he said. "Oh, hell, Lew, don't blame me for it."

"Then quit yapping about it," the cripple shouted. "To hell with it! I wanta forget it, see? Next guy says anything's goin' to get poked."

The week before, in the midst of the heat wave, Barchi had put up a notice calling a drivers' meeting for Sunday afternoon "for the purpose of organizing." "I rubbed their goddam noses in it," he had explained explosively a dozen times since. "They promised to be there, every goddam one of 'em." Not that he was calling them anything as mild as "goddam" by then, because out of the seven—Bill Bevis, the relief man, had been included—only Roane, the Chief, and Lew himself had shown up, and the Chief, decked out in white linen, white shoes, a yellow tie, and a flower in his lapel, had been on his way to a date and could not be persuaded to linger.

So it was a sore subject, and Lew resented Steve's pricking it. "I'm through with 'em," he said categorically. "I'm sick of 'em. Every goddam one of 'em laughed at me Monday. Thought it a hell of a joke I waited for 'em for an hour. Well, now they can go—"

"You went at it wrong," Steve said. "Don't try to talk to 'em in a bunch. Take 'em one at a time: every guy's got his weakness. Just find out what it is, and go to work on him."

"Nuts! I'm through."

"Why 'nuts'? It worked with me."

"Huh?" As Steve laughed, Barchi glanced around to make sure no one was in earshot, then stepped down from his truck and faced him on his own level. "What d'you mean by that? Not—not that the creamery—" His enthusiasm was rekindling. "No kidding! You hadn't said anything, so—"

"I don't know nothin' about the creamery," Steve said, rocking on his heels and viewing this change of heart with mocking satisfaction. "Get me straight: I'm on the side of the management, and I won't stand for no trouble in my department." His lips cocked up one-sidedly, revealing brilliant teeth. "But the boys are feeling their oats—see?—and there might be trouble in spite of me."

"No kidding!" Barchi said in mock awe, and his own slow grin made a death's-head of his face. "They got their nerve, ain't they?"

"Talk they heard about the drivers started 'em," Steve said. "So if the drivers aren't coming through after all, prob'ly I got nothing to worry about—"



Barchi said, "The drivers are coming through, goddam 'em, if I have to hit 'em on the head. Hell, will I go to work on those bastards now!"

"I heard one of the boys saying September 3rd'd be a good day to strike," Steve said. "It's right after Labor Day, when people are getting back from vacation, expecting to have milk waiting for 'em, and in a mood to change dairies if it ain't."

Barchi sobered abruptly. "Jeez, that's just a month away."

"Yup. Month from today."

"But I been working on the drivers a hell of a while now, and barely talked two around. How'll I get the rest 'fore next month?"

"That's your problem," Steve grinned. "But it's the 3rd the boys are planning on, and if you're wise you'll have your guys 'ready." Steve sounded almost threatening. "Otherwise you might miss the boat."

"Sure! Sure, I'll have 'em ready." But Barchi started toward the creamery looking more sober than usual.

Steve was disappointed; he had expected more guts from the man. Nevertheless, he smiled quietly as Barchi disappeared.

The following Monday evening, Clint Matlock hailed Sonia Goetz, who was on her front porch watching for Ben.

"Have I any gray hairs?" he asked. "If I haven't, it's a miracle." He was in an exalted emotional mood, and went on eagerly to explain: "Ed and Whart are away at the regional milk conference. I'm alone in the office. So this morning the health inspector from Moulton drops in to announce we can't deliver there tonight because of some dirty producers!"

"Oh, my Lord!" Sonia gasped. "Clint! That's one of our biggest dealers. You couldn't *possibly* let him miss a delivery. What did you do?"

"It was a question of about five hundred quarts of business," Clint admitted. "What could I do? The inspector had warned Ed three times; today he was set to crack down. He was only sorry Ed wasn't there to get the bad news in person."

"Could you get the farms cleaned up—have them reinspected?"

"Before tonight? Not a prayer."

"But, Clint, you had to do something. You couldn't sit there and let our delinquency ruin that poor man who'd put his trust in us."

"What would you have done?" Clint asked ironically. "All I could think of, and I did it promptly, was to holler for Steve Ochs." He shook his head. "I've had some hard thoughts about Steve, but I take 'em back."

"He talked the inspector out of it?"

"Not exactly. He spotted the fact that the bad producers were all B. He made sure—oh, so casually!—that the A ones and our own barns were in satisfactory shape, then suggested we deliver all A milk in Moulton until the producers were put in good shape again."

"Five hundred quarts of A? Oh, but Clint—"

"You see, all our barn milk is A, but a lot is surplus and bottled as B. We'd simply use that. Well, they argued the questions of capping and labeling, price and the attitude of the Control Board, but in the end there wasn't much that inspector could do but agree. And what a relief! I felt weak and watery. Fifteen minutes later, Steve had phoned the dealer and explained, we'd ordered notices to be put out with the milk, and had rounded up Swan, Charlie Dann, and about a dozen boys from farm, barn, and creamery, and they were on their way to give those producers a cleaning. I don't know when I've seen such action—not since I came to Weyland Meadows, certainly!—and it gave me a whale of a lift!" Sonia could see that he was still feeling it.

"Steve certainly acts," she said. "But check up on that surplus A from the barns. I'm almost sure we haven't five hundred extra quarts."

"We must have, if we're delivering it in Moulton tonight."

"Oh, we will be, in case there's a check. But some other dealers may be getting B under their A caps. We could well get away with that once. You notice how Steve's wasting no time fixing the producers up?"

Clint frowned. "That'd hardly be ethical."

"Oh, his ethical weaknesses are many. You know he's been known—when the milk ran short—to stretch it with water."

"Oh, now! The watering of milk went out with ragtime."

"It doesn't happen often, but has—and will again, as long as Steve is plant man. What happens more frequently is the cutting of one type of milk with another. That's why the Guernsey runs 4.4 or 4.5 and then drops abruptly to 4.0. Steve gives lip service to quality and uniformity, but little more. Ed knows it—and tolerates it. Not that he likes to, but when there's an emergency— Well, he can't, as he says, 'send the drivers out short and lose customers.'"

Clint could understand that, and wondered suddenly what his own choice would be in Ed's shoes. It was so easy to compromise.

Sonia added: "Steve's shady streak crops out in lots of ways. Notice how the creamery is under his thumb. And the plant bookkeeping! That icebox sheet—it used to drive Whart crazy! I swear I think Steve deliberately encourages mistakes there."

"Why? To hide petty chiseling?"

"No. I think it's this: he hasn't the complete authority in the creamery that Swan has in the farm department, and he resents it. So he confuses things until no one else can tell what's actually going on."

Clint said: "I wonder! Ed mentioned his getting a rake-off on plant supplies and equipment. If he's dishonest that way—"

"Dishonest? Oh, Clint, Steve wouldn't like that. A percentage is a perquisite. Dishonesty would be stealing milk from the box or supplies from the storeroom; and somehow I don't think he'd do that."

"I don't quite see why Ed puts up with him."

"For the same reason that you came down here caroling his praises tonight. He has a gift for emergencies that Ed hasn't, and it makes his peccadilloes worth putting up with."

Clint shook his head dizzily, realizing his own mixed feelings about the man.

"But we're missing the point, Clint, of what happened today. Steve came very gallantly to the rescue, yes. But remember: the producers should never have been in that condition in the first place!"

"That's true. It was a nasty shock to learn we were using milk from farms so poor that a health department wouldn't tolerate them. I suppose that's Ed's fault. Or Charlie Dann's."

"Ed's mostly. You see, we used to produce all our own milk and loved to boast about it in our advertising. Customers think we do still, but the business has grown too fast for that. Well, Ed's pride in the place resents the necessity of buying milk outside, so he's turned the producers over to Charlie Dann to handle. Except when an inspector forces him to do otherwise, he forgets them. Naturally they go to rack because Charlie hates the extra work and merely goes through the motions. Ed puts up with that because he dreads trouble and won't take a stand that'll bring it on. Decisiveness is one trait of Steve's I wish Ed had—about the only one!" She hesitated. "I think the trouble is, Ed's principles aren't clear in his own mind."

Clint listened frowning. What Sonia said echoed thoughts which had been creeping into his own mind in recent weeks.

"When I had your job," the woman added, "there were two things I worked toward. First, I tried to make Ed formulate and acknowledge his guiding principles. Until you've a philosophy of some sort, you can't command the respect and trust of those who look to you for decisions. Secondly, I argued for our own laboratory and a qualified bacteriologist to run it. Oh, Clint, that would solve so many problems! We get

these reports from the city lab forty-eight hours after the milk's been delivered, and if they're bad Ed says, 'Tsk! tsk! Oh, dear!' and that's all there is to it. But if the milk were sampled from the bottler and tested while it was still in the box, he'd have the square choice of sending bad milk out on the routes or of doing something about it—and I think, faced with that, he'd do something."

"Could we keep a bacteriologist busy full time?"

"Well, if the testing didn't give him enough to do, we could give him authority over the producers, to get them clean and keep them clean. We could give him the icebox report, let him take inventory, check the weighing-in, the bottling, routes, sales, returns, everything—"

"You want a trouble shooter, not a lab man. Tell you what I'll do. Now that my own work's routine, Whart might let me tackle that icebox. It'd be a start. I'd learn about the plant, Steve, what's going on."

"I only hope you can do something," Sonia said. "Your job could be so much more than just balancing a few books for Whart. You can help the farm—if you will."

Clint was anxious enough to help, for the farm was the future he had elected and there were good practical reasons for reforms such as Sonia suggested. Still, when you were new, it was wise to be cautious. This was not, perhaps, how an idealistic young man should feel where the public good was concerned; but he was practical too. He consoled himself that, though he was shy of acting too directly, there was still much he could do toward the same ends: there were subtler ways of lighting a fire than by calling for thunderbolts.

## V

COMING to work on Friday of that week, Amos Vliet found Steve Ochs waiting on the dock, a Steve whose dark face was without its usual devilish humor and was edged, instead, with ominous anger.

"Vliet," he said, "you been spreading stories about Barchi and me."

"Huh? Stories? You're crazy, Steve. I—"

"Quit stalling, goddam it. You called at the house yesterday—"

"The hell I did! Yesterday—Thursday—was my day off."

"Wednesday, then. What's the diff? You asked Allie where I was and then made some crack about Barchi and me."

"Nuts!" Amos said. "I just asked if you were off together again. I couldn't find you, and you been together so much—"

"The hell we have!" Steve seemed excited beyond reason by the accusation. "Can't I stop to kid with a guy without the whole farm saying we're cooking something?"

"I never said that. I asked your wife, were you off with him somewhere? I wanted to ask about those caps that hadda be ordered, see? I did ask you later on that day."

Steve looked at him with annoyance and suspicion, but he said finally, "O.K., skip it. You didn't mean nothing. Only listen: what you said to Allie, blast her fat soul, set her asking questions, and now damned if the whole farm ain't saying Barchi and me are up to tricks. And goddam it," Steve said, "I don't like it! I don't like my name hitched with that slobbering Communist's. People'll get ideas."

"O.K.," Amos said, "so I spoke out of turn. I'm sorry as hell."

"Well, keep your damned mouth shut in the future. You oughta know what this farm'll make of a crack like that to Allie."

"O.K.," Amos said again. "I can take a hint."

"Hint" was scarcely the word; Steve had been so angry that for once he had forgotten his beloved indirection and had been outright and explicit, and that, in turn, meant that the story about Barchi and him had touched a sensitive spot.

Amos, thinking it over, was well pleased with himself. The first hurdle, he decided, had been neatly crossed.

The day was a hot one, and long before noon Amos was stripped to trousers and rubber boots. After luncheon with the boys, he sought a patch of grass in the sun and stretched out, for he was trying patiently, if fairly hopelessly, to raise a tan. In most respects he was proud of his powerful, well shaped body, admiring its broad, muscled shoulders and flat back, its deep chest, ridged and glistening with an oily sheen of perspiration, its hard, fatless flanks, its narrow waist and slim hips. The boys called him "muscle-bound," but he could laugh at that; he was built as a man should be, and to his mind nothing on earth was more beautiful than the clean, elm-tree grace of a man's figure. But his satisfaction had its limits, of which his face was one, a round, cheerful, unformed face without the sharp angularity that his body deserved; the other was the putty color of his skin, which would neither bleach to a good clean white nor darken to a gold of which he could be proud.

He was doing his best for it when, through half-closed lids, he saw

Allie Ochs's huge bulk heaving around the corner of the creamery and bearing down on him. It was a sight which gratified him immensely, for he had hoped that curiosity might bring her to him and save him seeking her out a second time, which would have been awkward. He was mildly surprised at his luck and his prescience, but pleased.

She panted up to him. "Can I have some cream, Amos?"

"Uh? . . . Oh, it's you. Yeah, I guess so."

But she stopped him as he moved to get up. "I got to have some so Steve won't know I come over just to see you, but it's an excuse. First, you got to tell me what's going on. I asked everybody, but no one knows. They've all seen those two with their heads together, but—"

"What's all this?" Amos interrupted.

"Steve and Barchi. You said they were up to something—"

"Oh, no! All I asked was, was Steve out with him again. And what did you tell Steve I said that other for? He was sore as hell."

"I know. He bawled me out too. But that's why I'm sure he's up to something. I know Steve. He's found a pie to get his finger in."

"You're no dope," Amos grinned.

Mrs. Ochs breathed heavily, happily. "So? Well, tell me."

"Nuts! I'm not getting myself fired just to keep you in gossip."

"I wouldn't tell Steve, not after the things he said to me before. Besides, it ain't gossip. I'm worried. You got no idea what it's like being married to a man who's out looking for trouble all a time. Honestly, I always say it's a wonder my hair ain't white—"

"You got nothing to worry about. The way I heard it, Steve's out to double-cross the pants off Barchi."

"Oh!"

"He'll do it, too," Amos said. "Steve's a sonofabitch. So don't worry. Just forget it."

She would not forget it. It was as inevitable as day and night that the story he had started would, in due course, get back to Lew Barchi.

In his three years at the dairy, Amos had learned much from Steve Ochs about plant machinery, plant management, plant methods, but nothing had he studied at more persistently than Steve's way of manipulating people to his own ends. Now Amos was attempting to apply what he had observed, and the first returns had been satisfying. A single innocent hint dropped to Allie had started the farm thinking and wondering; now, thanks to the fat woman's curiosity, he had succeeded in adding a new element. So far so good.

But, in the forty hours that followed, Amos discovered that he was either a clumsy pupil, or that Steve's trickiness was more difficult than it looked. In the first place, Amos had misgauged the farm's curiosity. Mystery topped with hints of chicanery had touched off avid speculation, some of which proved closer to the mark than was good, and Amos, who had meant to whistle a mild breeze, was frightened by the whirlwind that developed.

Nor had he realized that Steve would instantly attribute this latest twist of the story to him. If Allie had revealed her source, he had been prepared to deny it up, down, and to her face; but he was not ready to have Steve leap to such a conclusion of his own accord—that was something harder to argue with. For five minutes it was touch and go whether Amos would be fired, and the miscalculation left him shaken.

On top of this, Barchi failed to hear the news quickly; and, since his reaction was unpredictable anyway and hence the weakest as well as the most important link in the whole chain, Amos was left wondering mostly how to control a crisis which he might not even witness, though he was watching the driver every second that he could. Steve, he felt, would have known how, but it was a lesson he had not yet mastered.

When the moment came, luck and gall carried him through.

Sunday morning was rainy, and Barchi stopped at the garage, after unloading, to complain about his brakes, which locked in wet weather; and it was then that he was told.

He promptly hit the roof. His first instinct was to deny all connection with Steve; and he did so, so heatedly that those who heard him were convinced there was one. He was an angry man, and a shocked and frightened one; for, though the details and purpose of their compact were apparently still matters for speculation, the fact that its existence was known threatened not only the plan but, if the office put two and two together, himself. Furthermore, he was immediately convinced that Steve intended somehow to do him dirt, and his second instinct was to find him, tell him off, and call the whole thing quits.

Amos was on the watch to prevent this; but, if Barchi's frightened rage had held, it might have been difficult. Luckily, before the driver reached the creamery it had occurred to him that, once he spoke to Steve, all chance to strike in the near future was gone; so he was suspended in a hot, uncertain, fluid state between anger and self-interest when Amos, having caught a glimpse of his face as he crossed the drive,

bounced through the door in the windscreen at the end of the dock and ran smack into him.

"Oops, sorry!" Amos said.

"Forget it." Through the door, Barchi could see Steve, at the far end of the dock, watching them narrowly, and he began to smolder.

"Going up?" Amos hastily pulled the screen open and, as he did so, spoke through it in a near whisper: "Before you lay into Steve, I want to talk to you. Tonight at my house? 2819 South Street. There's something in it for you."

The cripple hesitated, surprised, but Amos's bulk hid him from Steve. Then, "Yeah," he muttered. "Yeah, I'm going up. Thanks."

The screen closed, and Amos skipped down the steps and around the corner, ostensibly on an errand. He was not proud of his tactics, but relieved. They had been crude and dangerous and a long way below the Ochs standard which was his model.

He only hoped they had been successful.

Amos stood at a window from which he could see down South Street, misty with twilight, glistening with rain, almost empty of life. Behind him, the family talked, but he listened with only half an ear.

A car pulled to the curb a block and a half down: Barchi's car.

So the cripple had come!

A match flared back of the distant windshield, indicating he had stopped for a smoke before coming to the house. Perhaps he wanted to think over the cryptic invitation again. Or perhaps he was considering the neighborhood, or picking out Amos's house from a distance as a route man could, and sizing it up.

Let him. It was a good neighborhood, a Polish suburban community of small one- and two-family houses, and a lot of good guys lived there. Nor would he find a better-looking place in blocks than the Vliets' neat bungalow. Amos was proud of his home, as were all the family; proud of what it was both in fact and symbolically. Let Barchi see what guys could do without help from an organization!

The car remained where it was so long that Amos began to worry; but at last its headlights bloomed, and it drew abruptly away from the curb. He held his breath while it crossed the intersection, came down the street, and began slowing. Then, at last, he smiled.

The family made a ceremony of greeting Barchi, but as soon as he could Vliet dragged the disconcerted driver up the stairs to the big



dormitory which he shared with his brothers beneath the roof. Closing the door, he said: "I want you to know my people, Lew; but we'd better understand each other first. Afterward we'll go down and have some beer and cheese with 'em. O.K.?"

"You don't need to get anything for me," Barchi said uneasily. He seemed already to regret having come.

"Take a chair. Or flop on a bed, if you want. Like me."

Barchi compromised by sitting on a bed. "What's the idea, getting me out here? What d'you want?"

Amos grinned. "To know how you're feeling about Steve these days."

The long lips worked, but Lew held onto himself. "No reason I should feel any particular way about him, is there?"

"I wouldn't know—but there's stories around. They say he's boasting he'll skin you to hell and gone. Maybe it's just talk. If he meant to, he prob'ly wouldn't be boasting about it now."

This seemed less reassuring to Barchi than it might have been.

"Besides, Steve doesn't play crooked if he can get what he wants by playing straight." Amos left a gap there, but Barchi was still silent. "So I wouldn't know if the stories are true, or what you two are up to, if they are."

"We ain't up to a goddam thing. If we hadda been, we wouldn't be any more! And, if that's all you got to say, I'll be goin' along." Lew was going to reveal nothing.

"No—wait." Amos changed his tactics. "Sit down. I wouldn't call you a liar, Barchi; but I got eyes and ears, and I'm not as dumb as I look. You and Steve got things on the fire all right—and I can guess what."

Barchi studied him searchingly, made an impatient gesture, and started to rise, growling; then reconsidered. "O.K., then. What?"

"Cigarette?"

Barchi accepted the offer. It might at least keep him there while he smoked it, Amos thought, in case the first guess was wild—as it mustn't be!

He had not wanted to guess: it would have been safer to make Barchi betray himself. Steve, he was sure, would have worked it that way; but he had much still to learn, apparently, in methods. With the cripple suspicious and impatient, all he could do was guess.

And guess right.

He wet his lips and plunged: "A combined plant-and-driver strike."

It took Barchi aback. "Aaaah! That's what you think, uh? . . . Smart, aren't you? Got the day picked, too?"

"Steve moves fast," Amos said evenly. "It'd be in three-four weeks. Maybe Labor Day week end. That's the start of the winter season in the milk business, and it's sort of appropriate too." Seeing that his guess was good, he went right on: "And if Steve's in it, it's not for love of you or your drivers, or for us plant guys. It's because he's got a stake of his own. Anyone who knows Steve, knows that."

Barchi snorted. "O.K.—if you're so smart—what?"

"One day when he'd talked to you, he told me: he wants to be manager here. I've known a long time, anyway, he wanted to be that."

"Jesus Christ," Barchi said.

"I been wondering how he'd work it. A department head would have to be on the management side in a strike. He'd ruin himself otherwise."

Barchi only growled something noncommittal.

"Granted, the plant 'd walk out at a wink from him even while he hooted and hollered and denounced 'em out loud. But what if they did? And what if they won? Where would it get him? He'd be on the losing side, and no one breaks into the big money there."

"Hell! If we won, it'd put the skids under Thomas."

Barchi was tacitly admitting everything Amos had said, and it brought him a swift hot glow of triumph.

He said: "Under Steve too, wouldn't it? If Melius fired Thomas over the way a strike turned out, wouldn't he fire Steve as well, when it was his department that did the striking?"

"Oh, Steve'd find a way to look good while Thomas didn't."

"Maybe—but look! Would losing the strike get Thomas fired anyhow? It might cut his profits if he had to pay us more, or had to hire a new salesman or something; but Melius isn't worrying about profits—all he wants is to break even. He's promised lots of times to turn back the profits to us as wages anyway."

"Aw, that's talk!"

"I got it from Steve that we're all due for a raise this coming January. Everyone. Well, if the place can afford that, it can afford to give us strikers something and still make a profit."

Barchi's long face seemed grayer than before.

"And this is a coming place," Amos added. "It's growing—and, no matter if the strikers win or lose, it'll keep on growing. In fact, if you won a salesman, sales might boom. More sales mean more profits. The strike might put the dairy in the red a few months; but if the sales held up it could be in the black again by winter. And, since that's all Melius cares about, Ed 'd still have his job. . . . And Steve knows it!"

"But he's helping me! He must think—" The sentence trailed off as Barchi dragged thirstily at his cigarette.

"You can't tell what Steve thinks," Amos said, "ever."

"But how would double-crossing me get him anywhere?"

"Suppose you build up a strike with his help. Suppose it comes right up to a showdown. Then suppose Steve gets the creamery to compromise for next to nothing and drop out. What happens? You drivers are left in the soup. Thomas gets public credit for winning. Steve gets his private gratitude for the last-minute rescue."

"So what? The farm goes on making money, and Thomas is still manager. Where does that get Steve?"

"Wait now! Eastern Dairies 've been watching Thomas. He's supposed to be good, but he's never been really tried. So suppose he looks smart over this strike. Eastern Dairies says, 'Ha-ha! He knows his stuff. He can handle a tough problem. Let's get him!'"

Barchi began to see the point. "Holy hell!" he muttered.

"If the *strikers* win, Eastern Dairies 'll never look at him again, so he'd just stay here as long as this place made a profit. Indefinitely. So, if Steve wants the managership, he might figure it was easier to kick Thomas out the top than skid him out the bottom. What do you think?"

"The goddam sonofabitch!"

"And if Thomas went to Eastern Dairies with Steve's help he'd be likely to do all he could to make Steve his successor here."

Barchi was convinced. With a burning anger that made the words crackle, he called Steve everything he could lay his tongue to, and Amos, listening, felt pretty good. He had guessed right about the facts of the strike, and had argued a good case—right or wrong—against Steve. The hours he had spent figuring its angles had not been wasted.

Barchi wanted to find Steve and repeat to his face all he had said and more. He was halfway to the door when Amos stopped him.

"If you break with Steve, your strike's shot, Lew. And it's what you've worked for, a hell of a while. You want to give it up?"

"Hell, no! But what can I do? With that bastard double-crossing me—"

"His game is yours right up to the end, ain't it? He'll give you creamery help till the last minute, won't he? . . . Well, why not let him—and then change the ending to suit ourselves?"

Barchi's eyes were searching. "Ourselves? What's in it for you?"

"No profit to the Great Laboring Class," Amos admitted; "but I'd love to have Steve's job."

"But, if Steve got to be manager, wouldn't—"

"Naw. Not a chance. He knows I don't like taking orders. Oh, I'm not kidding myself," Amos said. "Even if I can ease Steve out of here, that doesn't get me his job. 'Cause why? 'Cause Ed Thomas don't know me from a hole in the ground. No one working under Steve can get attention. That's why he's got to go—and I don't mean into the manager-ship—before I get anywhere. Under the new plant man Ed 'll bring in from the outside, I may have a chance. That's all I want. . . . Frank enough?"

"Um-m-m." Barchi settled back on the bed, considering. "How'd you twist his scheme, anyway? . . . You got an idea?"

"Sort of a one," Amos admitted. "If you're interested."

Barchi seemed to think he was.

"O.K. I'll tell you about it. Then we'll go downstairs and find that beer and stuff."

The slow, miserable rain that had begun Saturday night was still coming down Monday afternoon when Barchi, soaked and in an ugly mood, came off the route. As luck would have it, he caught Steve Ochs in the icebox where he could not duck; and their encounter was explosive. There was no need for Barchi to act; he simply let himself go.

Steve, with a glance at the interested listeners, caught the driver's arm and pulled him toward the far end of the platform. "Shut up, you fool! You want the whole goddam place to hear? I know what you heard, and it's a lie! Use your head. If I was really crossing you up, would I broadcast it ahead of time?"

Barchi wanted to know caustically how the story got started then.

Steve shrugged. "Just one of those things, Lew. People here get talking. Look: I'm in this scheme up to my neck—"

"Like hell! There ain't no scheme no more. It's all off."

Steve's jaw tightened, and his eyes went hard. "Yeah?"

"You goddam right! I'm no stooge for you. I'm quitting."

"You're quitting! Who made this proposition, anyway? Me or you? . . . Well, we've gone too far to quit. You can't back out."

"Oh, no? How'll you stop me?"

Steve hesitated, and there was a beading of perspiration on his forehead. "What you want me to do? Get down on my knees?"

"I don't want anything." Lew broke away. "I'm through."

"Hey now, wait! You worked a hell of a while for this strike, and it's too good a scheme for both of us to drop just 'cause a lying story—"

Barchi snorted. "Lying? You think I'm a sucker? When all the farm says you're out to rook me, am I supposed to take your word you aren't? Nuts! I'm through. And it'll take more'n a slick tongue to talk me around."

"What more?"

"Huh?" Halted in mid-stride, Barchi sounded blank. Then he said, "Plenty! Only a damn fool 'd trust you now without a guarantee of some kind."

"What do you want? Name it. . . . I'll take an oath on the Bible."

"Yeah—I bet."

"I'll post a bond. A hundred dollars."

"A hundred bucks? Nuts!"

"What do you want, then?"

"How should I know? I haven't thought. Maybe you could put it in writing or something. Like any other deal."

"Writing?"—with a quick frown. "You think I'm a damn fool?"

"You think I am? I want to be protected, that's all."

"Hell, where'd I be if there was an accident—"

"There ain't gonna be any accidents in this deal!"

"But, Jesus, you could ruin me if—"

"Why? . . . Look: if you want to play my way, O.K. If not—"

"Well, to hell with givin' you anything in writing!" Steve said.

"O.K. Let's call it quits then, and quit arguing. That suits me fine." Barchi nodded emphatically. "Now lemme by. I gotta unload."

Steve glowered after him, his white teeth gnawing at his lips.

## VI

IT WAS five minutes past four of Friday morning, and the night outside was black. The soft-fingered slatting against the windows indicated that it was still raining after five full days.

The voice on the telephone said: "This is Jakey, Red. Jake Larsen, Route Three. Sumpin's wrong with the truck. It sounds funny and won't run."

"What's the matter?" Red Walsh mumbled. "The motor quit?"

"It ain't quit, but it sounds funny. And the truck won't go."

"You sure it's the motor?" Sleep was still heavy on his mind.

"Come down and listen at it yourself."

"Well, do you need another truck? Will I have to tow yours home? If I do, I gotta call Happy."

"For gosh sakes, how do I know? Sure, I want another truck!"

"O.K., I'll be down pretty soon. Where are you?"

"River Road."

"Oh-h! In mud? You yank the rear end out of her?"

"Naw," Jake said. "And look: I'm late. Get the lead out, huh?"

River Road was a red-clay, deep-rutted track so low that a backwash from the swollen stream had covered it in one place with a broad black puddle. Water rushed by heavily, a bare ten feet to the right, and street lights were few. Anyone but a milk driver (Red qualified the noun with his favorite participle) would have had the sense to stay out of there after days of rain (the rain was also qualified). But count on Jake Larsen not to walk across a street, if he could drive across.

He found Jake about a quarter of a mile in, wet, cold, dirty, and disconsolate. The truck was down on its frame. Guessing what was wrong, Red climbed in and stepped on the starter. "Thought you said it was the motor?" he growled. "Listen to it: purrs like a kitten." He mentioned the kind of kitten too.

"Wait till you put her in gear," Jake muttered.

Walsh gave him a look. The drivers lived with and by their trucks; yet, when things went wrong, they never knew what—never had any idea! He put it in gear, let the clutch in gently and for only an instant. "The rear end," he said flatly. "Like I told you over the phone. What'd you do to her?"

"Me? Nothin'! I was just running along easy, up on the side there straddling the ruts, when—whammy! I slipped in. It could happen to anyone."

"So what? If you were running in low gear—"

"Low, hell! I was in a hurry. I was late."

Rain slanted into the head lamps, gleamed blackly on the slickers of the two men, made bubbles on the water standing in the ruts and holes of the road. Walsh said with cold fury: "Damn you, Jake, if you got me out of bed in the middle of the night to come down here in this blue-bellied weather just 'cause you were fool enough to trip your governor again—"

"Like hell I did," Jake cried furiously. "Like hell I did! That couldn't 've had nothin' to do with it anyway. I wasn't going that fast!"

Red's vocabulary, though strong, was not extensive; still, he made his opinion of Jake reasonably clear. He also stated what he would do about it: Ed Thomas would be told.

But Jake, back at the farm later that day, did not wait to be sent for. He stormed into the office, his soaked coverall mud-bedraggled, and his temper no whit sweetened by the cold, wet hours he had worked.

"Y' hear what happened last night?" he demanded of Ed Thomas. "Well, what's wrong with that garage? Why don't they keep our trucks in shape? How can I deliver my route if I have to sit in the mud half the night because a truck breaks down? Such a stinking bunch of mechanics—"

"That wasn't the way I heard it."

"I'll bet not! Red got his story in first, didn't he? Well, it wasn't my fault; it was the truck's. Sure, I slid into that hole, but it shouldn't 've hurt a truck that was in decent shape any at all!"

Thomas frowned. "And what about the governor?"

"So the governor was tripped! So what? You gimme a route runs all over town and expect me to deliver it driving only thirty-five. Well, I can't. No one could. So what am I supposed to do?"

"Quit stopping for so many hamburgers-and-coffee on the way."

"Goddam it—"

"Cut it, Jake. You aren't fooling me a bit. I've no doubt at all your driving was responsible for what happened last night. You've always given your trucks hell."

"I have not! I'm a good driver. It's only Red says I ain't—and that's to cover up the bad shape his trucks are in. He puts governors on 'em because he is afraid if we run 'em more'n thirty-five they'll fall apart!"

"Now wait! I *know* how you drive. I watch you come in here almost every day, and you're the worst driver we've got—"

"Have I had 'ny accidents? Have I?"

"You will if we don't hold you down. And you've already cost us money. No! Now don't yell at me; I've heard enough. From now on, you'll drive with that governor. If we catch you tripping it *once* more, you're through, Jake! That's a warning. Now get out. I'm busy."

Jake, dead white, spun on his heel and returned to the drivers' room, where Barchi, Ben Goetz, and Chief Myhychyk were working. One after another, they stopped and looked up.

"Hey, what's the matter, chief?" Myhychyk said.

Jake snapped, "They're going to fire me."

Ben gaped. "Fire you? What for?"

"For tripping my governor, that's what for! He says to my face I'm a lousy driver. I'm going to have an accident, he says. So I'm through here if I trip my governor again. Of all the lousy—"

"Oh," Ben said. "I thought—"

"We work all night and all day, and we get paid nothin' for it—"

Barchi's long face loosened in a smile as he heard his own speeches read back to him; but he let Larsen get well started before he put in an oar. Then: "Jake, if I told you once, I told you a hundred times: with a drivers' organization, we couldn't be fired without due and sufficient cause. You could tell 'em to hell with their governors if you had an organization behind you."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Jake cried. "I'm for it. How 'bout the rest of you? What d'ya say? Who else is in?"

"You, me, the Chief, Hal Roane," Barchi answered. Ben had dropped his eyes. "That's a majority. That's all we need."

"Fine! When can we get together? Monday?"

Sensing that Jake's anger was transitory, Barchi hesitated. Tomorrow would have been better; or Sunday. But there was Steve to settle with, and Steve still showed no sign of being ready to bargain.

"O.K., Jake, Monday. The date's yours. You'd better keep it."

## VII

OVER the heavy rumbling of his bottle washer and the banging of cases and cans on the platform where Ihloff was loading Quinlan's truck, Frenchy hollered, "Hey, Amos, here comes your pints."

Amos Vliet nodded, dragging his eyes from Steve Ochs, who was watching the red line on the pasteurizing chart lengthen as the first batch of Guernsey A heated its appointed time. The head of the creamery seemed preoccupied, and there were tense, vertical lines of strain in his dark face. The young bottler was grimly pleased.

The first of the pints, gleaming and clean, followed the quarts through the slit in the partition, wobbling on the metal belt that carried them. Amos watched the last of the larger bottles flush swiftly full of



milk, drop away from the red-rubber teat of the bowl and pass from bottler to capper, where a black-and-white metal disc was crimped over its neck, labeling it Vitamin D; then he stopped his machine to lower the bowl to the smaller size, and Frenchy Boudreau had to stop his also as pints piled up. An immense silence fell over the creamery, but Steve did not even look up.

He isn't watching that chart, Amos thought—he isn't watching anything. He's too deep in thought.

When the bowl was down, Amos started the bottling machine again. Though not physically taxing, his job took a certain concentration: things went wrong with machinery as old as this; and you had to watch for the occasional bottle that came through dirty, wet, or with its lip chipped, for the valve that stuck and left a bottle half filled, or for the cap that was crimped on askew. With bottles coming off the machine at one a second, it was no job for a dreamer. Nevertheless, his attention remained divided: his hands moved mechanically, and so did his eyes, flicking up briefly at each pint; but his mind was on the motionless figure opposite.

The job of bottling was more than knowing how to run a machine and inspect its product. It took headwork too. You had to know how the rate of flow of milk, cream, and buttermilk varied; how to get the right cap on the right milk on the right day of the week; how much milk of each type to bottle each day. The cardinal sin was bottling too little, sending the drivers out short, but there was no profit in bottling too much and having to dump it down the sewer. Large extra orders were reported to the bottler in advance, but the real headaches were the small fluctuations; only experience and intuition could tell on which days six routes and twenty dealers would all want a case apiece more and on which days they would all leave a case in the box. The first half of the week was lighter than the second; summer was lighter than fall-winter-spring, but holidays were heavy; extreme heat meant a light sale, while a threatened storm might bring an unexpectedly large one. Seven days a week you weighed such factors and guessed seven-thousand-how-many-odd-quarts to bottle, how many should be Raw, Vitamin D, or Guernsey A; how many should be B or "WM." And another of the bottler's headaches was supply. Cows being cows, receipts from the barns and producers fluctuated with the seasons: winters, when sales were up, you got less; summers, when you wanted less, you got more; and to cover the winter trade you took on so many producers that your summer surplus was unmanageable. This you shrugged off, using it for ice cream,

cheese, or buttermilk or separating it for cream; but there was no shrugging off a shortage. For a shortage, there was no excuse.

This was the work which Amos had been doing with quiet efficiency for some time; some of it was actually Steve Ochs's responsibility, and he was dourly pleased at having taken it over, at being, in the eyes of the creamery gang, Steve's second-in-command in all but official recognition. He was pleased, justifiably proud, but not satisfied.

He would be satisfied only when he had Steve's job. And perhaps not then, though he did not consciously look beyond that goal.

Of gaining it in time, he had no doubts; of achieving it immediately, even if Steve left, he was realistically skeptical for the reasons he had given Barchi. Still, there was a chance, and the long odds of the game permitted him to play it without too much hopeful excitement, boldly, almost impersonally, with clear and factual perspective. If he won, good. Even if he did not, easing Steve out would be a worthy step in the right direction. Thus, all week, he had felt ice-cold and calculating while Barchi had jittered impatiently and Steve had worried, gloomy and irritable; had felt in control of events which were moving well. Indeed, the restlessness of the others had amused him—particularly Steve's, for he knew what was bothering the man. Steve wanted to be manager and had seen his chance; the risks had seemed negligible, the gain fairly certain, and the vision had been close enough and real enough to grip his imagination. But then Barchi had balked, demanding guarantees which were preposterous. It was impossible to grant them and impossible to give the scheme up without an effort to salvage it. This was a dilemma from which (Amos hoped and believed) Steve would find only one way out: not, at first glance, a very promising one but one which might grow on him, appealing to his trickiness and his talent for making people do what he wanted. If there were other ways, long, careful, and not-too-wishful thought had not revealed them to Amos; and Steve's moodiness since Monday seemed to imply they had not yet occurred to him either.

But perhaps it was time to nudge Steve in the right direction. Amos said: "Hey! How long you lettin' that stuff cook?"

Ochs flinched. "Huh? . . . Oh!" And his eyes focused.

"You been standin' there twenty minutes. I thought every second you'd turn it off. What's the matter? Something on your mind?"

"Hell, no!" His hands were busy with the valves. "Ready for this?"

"Almost. . . . Thought there might be. There's a new story around."

"Yeah? What?"—with a frown.

"They say there'll be changes around here soon." Amos lied with deliberation. "They say you're leaving Weyland Meadows, moving up. Well, maybe; maybe not. I'm not asking, see? But if y' do, don't forget I was always on the job and did my best and could take a hint pretty good."

Steve's look was vague; but then he said, "You shouldn't believe all you hear."

"O.K. . . . But you might keep me in mind."

The plant man scowled and turned away.

As Barchi was leaving the farm, Steve Ochs intercepted him.

"You said your last word on—you know—what we talked about? The wife and kids'll be at the movies tonight, if you want to drop in for a drink."

Barchi hesitated. "You can't talk me around."

"Maybe not, but I got an offer if you want to hear it. Listening can't hurt you." Steve waited, while the driver shuffled uncertainly. "If you come about eight, they'll be gone."

Barchi came.

By nine o'clock both men were well on the ball. Barchi, his legs cocked up on two chairs, was pretending to be a shade drunker than he was; Steve, his second apple-high untouched at his elbow and the fire of excitement hot behind his eyes, leaned on the dining-room table, waiting for the moment to strike. They had been sparring for nearly an hour, Steve being downright pathetic about the months of effort Barchi had wasted organizing the strike if he gave it up now, hinting that, as manager, he could grant the drivers unlimited favors if they helped him to his goal; Barchi remaining shyly mistrustful throughout. His efforts at organizing were not wasted, he said: if they struck now they would need the creamery's help, yes; but in time all of them would see things his way, and then they would be strong enough to act alone. Why, he had made one convert just this week: Jake Larsen, who was sore at the farm over his truck.

"Then you got a majority?" Steve said. "With the creamery's help, you could strike tomorrow. Well—why not?"

With alcoholic frankness, Lew said he didn't trust Steve. "You got a reputation, see? They say you'd rape your own grandmother."

"But I'd play straight with my worst enemy if it got me anywhere. And playing straight with you'll get me plenty, won't it?"

"You could prove your good faith. We could write up a little contract,

you guaranteeing to deliver the creamery's help to the drivers if and when they strike."

"Jesus hell!" Steve said. "No! I don't trust you no more'n you trust me. You could hold sumpthin' like that over my head all my life."

Time to quit fencing, Barchi decided. He lowered his legs and polished off his drink. "I guess we got no more to talk about then."

"I'll still put up a cash bond—"

"A hundred bucks? When you're shooting for a job that pays three times that a month! You could lose it and still be happy."

"I could scrape together maybe five hundred," Steve said.

"Chicken feed."

Steve sighed. "Not to me, it ain't. . . . Then a cash settlement's out?" He paused, drew a deep breath. (Here it comes, Barchi thought.) "Suppose we put in this contract what you want, but also that you guarantee the drivers' striking. We'd make two copies, both sign both, and each hold a copy. We'd each have a hold on the other, then."

This was not "it" at all; in fact, this was unforeseen. Lew thought: Why, hell! everyone on the farm knows my part. It's Steve's that's secret. I could write anything he wanted and still be on top.

He had his mouth open to say, "O.K.," but shut it again. It was too easy. "I got to think it over," he said.

Steve pressed him gently and then more urgently, and Barchi, bewildered and increasingly mistrustful, squirmed and backed water, trying to figure it out, and becoming more reluctant all the time. It was simply too good to be true.

"Goddam it, Steve, you ain't giving me somethin' for nothin', an' I can't see what's in it for you. I don't trust you."

Grinning inside with the sheer delight of a successful ruse, Steve growled: "Jesus Christ, what do you want? I offer you everything you asked for, practically, and you hedge! I don't get it! What more do you want?"

"Ah-h-h!" Barchi grumbled, nonplused.

"O.K., O.K., O.K.! Twice I make good offers and you turn 'em down. All right; here's one more, and it's the last: I'll write your damned contract, but you can't hold it. Somebody neutral's got to. What d'ya say?"

A warm wave of relief relaxed Lew's tenseness for this was "it" at last. He scowled gloomily for Steve's benefit, however. "Who?"

"Almost anyone."

"Ben Goetz, maybe?"

"Well, no. The drivers are out. They're too much on your side."

"Not Ben. He's against a strike. He'd be good."

"Ben can be pushed around," Steve said. "The drivers are all out."

"Well, who then? The office force, I suppose."

"How about a department head: maybe Red Walsh?"

The little cripple snorted. "Your best friend, huh? Nuts! But speakin' of department heads, how about Charlie Dann? He's no friend of yours, no friend of mine. He's really neutral."

Steve reached for his drink, gulped, and came up with an answer: "You couldn't trust him. He'd read the contract. He'd use it against me and spoil everything for both of us."

Uh-huh, Barchi thought. Steve can't control him! It helped prove Amos Vliet was right—Steve was out to hand him the dirty end of the stick. And it confirmed the wisdom of playing ball with Vliet.

One or the other found an objection to every name that was mentioned. Finally, as though in desperation, Steve said: "All that's left is someone from the creamery, then. Uh—Vliet, say? the bottler?"

Barchi laughed in his face.

"Well, who else is there?"

"Maybe we should go to the mayor or the governor. Or the bank."

"Maybe we should toss the whole thing up," Steve muttered.

"Could two people hold it, one from each side? Ben and Vliet, maybe?"

Steve said, "I'll make us another drink and think about it."

As he disappeared into the kitchen Barchi felt a grin twitching his lips, but squelched it rigidly, knowing Ochs might be watching. He fidgeted instead, worrying at one fingernail with his teeth.

When Steve came back there was a new hardness in his eyes. "The fewer that know about this, the better. One person holds it—or no one. . . . Now look: I'm tired fooling. My writing anything at all is crazy, but I'll do it provided I got the say about who holds it."

"But—" Barchi began blankly.

"Wait now. I'll do one of three things. Take your choice. But choose one, or else drink your drink and go home."

His bearing was so arrogant that Barchi's protest sounded meek: "But, hell, Steve! Your writing this won't do me no good if you keep control of it afterwards. You might as well not do it at all!"

"Then let's make a mutual contract and each hold a copy. That's your first choice, and I'd think you'd grab it! If not, O.K., you can let either Red Walsh or Amos hold the one I'll sign for you. Now, make up your mind between 'em, or I'm through!"

Barchi's hesitation was real. On the face of it, it was crazy to consider any but the first alternative; but it was also foolish, Steve being Steve, to accept it—when Steve set two bad choices against one that was too good, you were wise to choose the bad. So Barchi figured. Moreover, there was his plan with Amos. Still he was tempted, desperately tempted.

"Snap into it," Steve barked. "What's the answer?"

"Well, hell!" He was perspiring freely. "I have to think—"

"The hell you do!" Steve, stampeding him, got up. He was afraid he had made that first alternative too attractive.

"Wait a minute!" Barchi said. "Don't be so damn touchy. I'll—I'll let Vliet hold the contract provided you tell him before me that it's not to be delivered to anyone before September 10th, and that he's to give it to me then if the drivers have lost the strike. We'll call it a bet on the outcome."

Steve's triangular smile blossomed for the first time in a week, and his eyes were afire. "All right," he said. "Sure, that's all right."

He thinks he's won, Barchi thought, wanting to grin himself but keeping it deep inside; he tried to look like a guy who had the short end of a bargain.

"I'll fix us another drink." Steve's whole face glowed. "We'll drink to the strike. To better wages, hours, and conditions for the drivers. To the new manager of Weyland Meadows Dairy. What say?"

"All right," Barchi said, without enthusiasm.

We'll drink to someone else too, Steve thought: to a new plant foreman by the name of Vliet. Provided he can take a hint!

## VIII

WHEN Weyland Meadows had been a rich man's hobby, parasitic departments had sprouted like suckers on corn. One of these, long discontinued, was the greenhouse in which Gerald Melius had cultivated fancy blooms at fancy prices. The buildings, idle for years, had disintegrated to a state that Ed Thomas hated to remember lest he be forced to waste precious hours repairing or tearing them down. They were easy to forget, lying half hidden in a gentle swale behind a windbreak of trees, well back from both county and state roads, and reached only by a two-rutted, dead-end track.

Among them was a small building that had done double duty as a sales-display room and as home for the greenhouse keeper; and it was here that Fusek and Dick Flemhos had squatted—a word perhaps unjustified, since Boo, back in the spring, had actually asked permission of Charlie Dann to stay there. If he asked at a moment when Charlie was thinking of something else, and if he gave the impression that he meant for overnight only, it was probably inadvertent; but in mid-August the two were still there, rent-free and comfortable, having turned on the electricity and running water for themselves, and being worried only by the approach of fall and the problem of heat during the winter. Their presence was no actual secret. Almost anyone, with thought, could have said where they were living; but they were insignificant boys who, if out of sight, were out of mind, and no one wondered or cared to wonder what kind of life they were leading there alone.

On the night that Barchi talked with Steve, they had company.

The girl Ruthie was giggling. Ruthie clowned, and Dick Flemhos disliked her very much for there was no room in his dark, misshapen mind for giggling and clowning. He stood at the big front window, which had been for display, staring blackly into the night, trying to ignore the three who were drinking beer and kidding at the table behind him.

The radio—it and a car were necessities of life for Boo—had just marked ten-thirty with a station break, and there was an hour still before they could run the girls home and go to the midnight milking. Dick dreaded that last hour: it was then that Boo and Ruthie sneaked off by themselves.

The voices of the girls were shrill and cheap. "You boys oughta clean up once in a while. Don'tcha ever sweep? I never seen such a mess; I never did!"

"You need for one of us to stay here 'n' take care of you, huh?"

"Sure!" Boo said. "How 'bout it, honey-Ruth?"

"Whyn't you get some furniture?" Opal said, tittering. "Gee, I couldn't live without no more furniture 'n this. It looks nekkid."

"Whadda we need with more furniture? We got four chairs, a table, a radio, an' a big old bed upstairs. Hell, we-all c'd git along 'thout the chairs and the table, couldn't we, Ruthie-girl?"

Muscles swelled in Dick's jaw. What did Boo see in girls anyway? What made him chase off to town every so often and come back with a couple of tramps? What was the fun in it?

He always brought back two, and Dick, afraid of girls and hating them because of some half-grasped awareness of what they should have meant and didn't, liked it: people so rarely brought him anything. Trust Boo, though, to share alike! Dick's feeling for Boo was a warm possessive yearning.

Boo didn't always bring the same girls, though Ruthie and Opal had been here often; but, whoever they were, they were a waste of beer and money. Boo and he, with two beers apiece, could have more fun alone than drinking twice that with a pair of damned girls.

Boo and Ruthie began to dance. They had had enough beer to be high, and they clowning together, burlesquing. They—and Opal—seemed to find it pretty funny, but it griped Dick. Watching made something ball up inside of him like cellophane crushed in the hand, crackling and hurting.

But when they quit fooling and began dancing in earnest it was worse. Blood pounding in his ears, Dick turned his back on them, and Opal came over and stood beside him, looking into the night.

He could stand Opal. Her moods oddly often paralleled his own, and she was undemanding, having learned long since that he wanted nothing from her or from any girl.

She said, making talk, "How long you known him?"

"Oh—a year. I come to work here a year ago last May."

"Think a lot of him, don't you?"

"Aw, we get on good—mostly."

"Roomed together long?"

"Since spring. Boo had a fight with the old bitch that runs the boarding house, and I left with him. We come over here."

They were both conscious of the dancers behind them.

Opal asked, "You got any family?" but feeling him stiffen added hastily: "Skip it. Sorry. I was just talking."

"I had a mother," he told her. "That's all—ever. And she's dead."

"So's mine."

He looked at her. "I'm glad she is, see? She was no good. She died when I was eight—twenty years ago, a'most. . . . She was no good, and she drank. She hated me."

"Hated you? Yeah? Why?"

He said sourly, "You guess!" and the girl's eyes fell.

They heard Boo whisper, "Come on, hon—it's late," and he was pulling Ruthie toward the other room where the stairs were. There was a scuffle



there, the girl yelping and giggling before she clattered suddenly up the stairs at a run.

Opal started looking for a magazine she had brought with her, but Dick stood rigid, feeling sick. Even though Boo and Ruthie always went upstairs, he always hoped. He hated Ruthie with a blinding, lurid fury that was like flame in the night. Couldn't Boo see she was a cheap tramp? Did you have to be a poor bastard with a whore for a mother before you saw through girls?

He remembered his mother bitterly: old while still young, ugly in a raddled mockery of prettiness, a slattern with a mean temper. He still had scars she had given him in her hate.

Everyone hated him—except Boo, of course—and everyone did what they could to make him unhappy, even to sending girls like Ruthie to come between him and his one friend.

He could hear her giggling up there, through the creaking of bed-springs and a lot of other noises. It sounded like a roughhouse.

He went suddenly to the foot of the stairs and stood tensely, fists clenched. Some day he'd go up and drag her out and hurt her. It wasn't her bed; it was his. His and Boo's.

Oh, the two of them would come back to it later, after the milking; but Ruthie's smell would still be there where he had to sleep. He would lie all night smelling her powder, her dime-store perfume, and that sickish-warm acrid odor that always clung to the blankets after she and Boo had been together.

Opal, watching him quietly, inexpressively, felt more pity than contempt. That poor damned guy! she thought. That poor damned guy!

## IX

STEVE and Lew Barchi closed their bargain Saturday evening, the 17th of August, and before Monday the dairy was uneasy. There were stirrings as definite, oily, and apparently causeless as a ground swell. Nobody knew anything, and yet everyone simultaneously sensed something in the wind and dragged forth insignificant details from a hundred sources to prove it. Allie Ochs whispered proudly that Steve had got over his grouch while she was at the movies Saturday, and had been in such high humor that she had had no sleep all night. Red Walsh thought Steve looked like a cat that had eaten a canary, and Ben Goetz made the same

simile even more trite, describing Barchi. Others said Larsen had been sounding off about the farm, and Myhychyk had told somebody who had told Manny Zapeto that there would be a drivers' meeting soon. The farm added it up and drew conclusions.

Thus Ed Thomas, arriving with the mail Monday morning, had reason to look bleak. Calling the bookkeeper inside, he said:

"You heard this talk of a strike? There's trouble brewing. I feel it."

Wharton Petitt, living in town, had neither heard nor felt, but was not surprised. "The drivers? Uh. It was only a question of time with Barchi stirring them up. You'd better get rid of him."

"But he's such a damned good milkman, Whart—"

"Is he?" The bookkeeper snorted. "Have you looked at his sales figures since you cut his route in June? . . . He hasn't put on a quart! He doesn't come within twenty dollars of earning his guarantee."

"Oh, dear!" Thomas said wearily.

"And have you noticed the time of day he comes in? Instead of working at selling milk, he uses the farm's time to agitate against us. I've told you before to fire him; now I say it again, and you'd better this time."

"If these stories are true— But I want to be sure."

"Good God, will you wait till they actually strike? You have to stop trouble, Ed, before it's organized—or not at all."

"But firing a man— Force is no solution, Whart. Strikes are merely symptoms of a disease, not the disease itself—"

"The disease," Petitt said flatly, "is Lew Barchi, and it's an easy one to cure. As to force"—his thin lips twisted in contempt—"they won't hesitate to use it on you, so don't coddle them. Act now, before they get together."

"And precipitate trouble? If the creamery's in it too—"

"The *creamery*? . . . So that's the game! Then fire Steve, too."

Thomas smiled thinly. "Do you want to depopulate the farm?"

"If we have to stop this—yes! Steve Ochs is another trouble breeder—"

"So far there's nothing at all to show he's involved—"

"Of course he is—if the creamery is."

Thomas shook his head. "I don't know. I'll have to think it over."

Always, Petitt thought, Ed Thomas would think till it was too late to act. Now if only he—Petitt—were running the farm . . .

Late that afternoon, the drivers held their meeting. Lew Barchi buttonholed each as he arrived, asking him to hang around to hear im-

portant news, and when they had all checked in, he sent Carly Groce into the main office and got down to business.

To Tom North and Bill Bevis, who had not even known there would be a meeting, and to Ben Goetz, who had known but not sensed its purpose, what happened next was a shock. Chief Myhychyk, Hal Roane, and Jake Larsen, working with Barchi, voted that the drivers organize, and elected Lew president and the Chief secretary. It was frighteningly cut-and-dried, and the astonished minority could do little but yell. This they did as soon as they recovered breath, though it might have done them small good had not Barchi's bloc broken up at the critical moment on a vote to have dues, to which Jake and the Chief objected. Realizing his mistake, and rattled by the sudden vigor of the opposition and by the mild support of his own backers, Barchi, instead of calling for an immediate strike vote, tried to pump up some enthusiasm by trying to justify it.

This found little favor even in his own following. Roane stayed sullenly silent, and all Myhychyk would say was "You betcha, chief!" while Jake kept muttering about his governor, trying to rekindle his resentment. Barchi was left to face the protests of the minority and to hammer at them with the grievances he had dwelt on for months, about which they were sick of hearing.

"I tell you now's the time," he said, pounding the table. "We got a majority for this strike. If you three don't come in, we're striking anyway."

Tom North asked, "What'll your pals do when you're fired, huh?"

"They'll walk out! All of 'em. Right off. They can't fire any of us if we stick together!"

There was a small awkward silence, and Tom chuckled, "I bet!"

The cripple sensed he was losing his audience: Tom and Bevis were no longer frightened, and his supporters were actually wavering. He would have liked to have them vote for a strike on their own initiative, but he was too late for that; he must save what he could.

He said abruptly: "Listen, you guys. Get this! The creamery's striking with us. They got the guts to go after their rights, if you haven't!" It seemed to make no impression, and, disappointed and shaken, he insisted desperately, "Don'tcha get it? The whole creamery gang's walking out the same time's we do. See what it means? We can't lose!"

"How y'know?" Roane asked.

"Hell, I been working while the rest of you camped on your tails!"

"You and Steve fixed something?" Bevis asked, recalling talk.

The cripple said carefully: "Steve'll be on the management's side, shoulder to shoulder with Ed Thomas, bucking this strike—and you'll never get him to admit anything else."

They understood, and there was a ripple of interest.

"You see what it means? With the creamery out, the farm'll have to deal with them, us, and twenty dealers besides, all yelling for their milk."

Roane said, "By God, Lew!"

And with dawning comprehension the Chief cried, "Hey!"

"It's in the bag," Barchi said. "Ed might leave one or two routes undelivered, but he's gotta supply those dealers. He *can't* let us strike. It'll never even get to the walkout stage, see? 'Cause what can he do?"

There was no answer, but they saw the possibilities.

"Fire us?" Barchi inquired rhetorically. "Can he fire all his drivers, all his creamery gang, all his dealers? What's he have left? Can he bottle milk or run routes with guys picked off the streets?"

Myhychyk said, "When we doin' it?"

"On the 3rd." Barchi explained why.

"What we askin' for?" Larsen demanded. "There's got to be sumpin' 'bout us driving our own trucks in our own way."

Barchi struck swiftly. "First we have to vote a strike. All in favor say Aye. What about you guys? You with us? You, Bill—"

Bevis shifted uneasily. "Maybe you got something this time. I never thought so before. But I'm relief man—"

Myhychyk said, "Better get in on it, chief!"

And Jake Larsen: "Even a relief man can use a raise, can't he?"

Barchi swung on Tom North. "How 'bout you?"

"I don't know," Tom mumbled, and his uncertainty was new. "Look: if the creamery wants to strike, let 'em, and let's see how they make out—"

This brought a chorus of scorn in which even Bevis joined, and Barchi knew the tide had turned. He could feel the excitement lifting them. North felt it too and wavered.

"I don't favor a strike," he said. "I never have. But—you four and the creamery go ahead. Ben, Bill and I, we'll be neutral—"

He was drowned in angry protest. They weren't taking all the risks while he sat back and got the benefits!

"All right, all right," Tom said hastily. "Forget it."

Barchi said, "Ben—how 'bout you?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't want to strike."

"Well, we don't need you." Barchi said, shrugging. "O.K., boys! We've voted six to one to strike. Now what'll we ask for?"

The meeting got down to details with surprising enthusiasm while Ben Goetz listened in silence, unbelieving.

He told Sonia about it at supper: "It was—unreal. I can't think they mean it. They voted to strike September 3rd. They're sending Barchi and Myhychyk to Ed Thomas on the 26th to tell him what they want. They've got their demands all figured out, and yet—somehow—I can't believe it'll happen."

Sonia shook her head. "I'm afraid it will, Ben. But thank God you're not with them. Can't you see what's happened?"

"I *saw* what happened. They got all pepped up. Everybody had suggestions; they all talked at once. They planned everything to the last detail. . . . And I—I don't understand it. I couldn't even get scared—'cause how could it happen like that? None of them had any new reason to strike. Nothing's changed since yesterday to make 'em sore—"

"But it's obvious," Sonia was bitter. "They saw a chance to get what they wanted without much risk—and grabbed it. Oh, Ben, I'm so thankful you had the courage not to join them. They're scavengers, sneaking after their share of the creamery's kill."

"It didn't take much courage. I'd 've been scared to join them. Because they're not fighting for the principle of wages or hours; they're fighting for gain, and when the pinch comes—as it will—they'll think of themselves, same as now, and duck for safety. I wouldn't want to be in with them then." Ben sighed. "Lucky they didn't make an issue of it, I guess."

Sonia said: "You would have stood up to them. I know you would!"

But Ben sighed rather sadly.

News of the strike was whispered by Tuesday morning, and few felt the unreality of which Ben Goetz had spoken. The only question was whether the creamery was also in. There was a flat denial from Steve Ochs; indeed, every chance he got, Steve said it was a damned lie; that the creamery wouldn't dare strike. The creamery itself, not sure how it was supposed to stand, let this ride; but, even so, many believed and said that Steve and Barchi had made a deal.

Sympathy developed slowly. There had never been a strike at Weyland Meadows, for in a business losing money employees worry more about holding what they have than adding to it. Till now the word "strike"

had scarcely existed for them; yet here, abruptly, it had become voted action. The farm was reluctant, frightened. Not until—like the drivers—they realized that the boys stood a good chance of winning, did hope and excitement grow and begin to sweep the community.

Not surprisingly, the creamery was first to feel both. Center of farm interest, the plant men, talking among themselves, discovered they were a key department and could tie the farm in a knot if they chose. It was an interesting thought, and they played with it in spite of Larry Ochs's warning not to get his brother mad. No formal action was taken, but Frenchy Boudreau found a chance to speak to Steve on Wednesday.

"Hear we-all 're gonna strike," he said. "Ha 'bout it, boy?"

"You'd be crazy to try."

Frenchy pricked his ears. "Sounded like a purdy idea, sort of."

"There'll be no strike if I have anything to say," Steve snapped.

But he added no "if" clauses when he really meant something, so Frenchy grinned. "We gonna do it on our own, see? Mighty fine idea; too purdy to miss. What'd you do if we did—uh, boy?"

"Fire the first man that strikes. . . . Now, I heard all the strike talk I want. You and the boys shut up about it, get me?"

The threat was ambiguous: if they struck, they would do it together, there would be no first. About the rest, however, there was no doubt: Steve wanted them to shut up, and they did so. The farm, noticing the change, read into it the implications they wanted to.

Sentiment spread. Happy Jacobs wanted the garage to join in: "We done asked for raises plenty and never got 'em. How 'bout it, Red? If those guys get somethin' off the farm, why shouldn't we? We been grousing a hell of a while about getting another helper. Now's the time to ask. Then we wouldn't have to work overtime no more."

Red Walsh, not arguing the merits of wages and hours, said, "Steve tells me the drivers'll get caught with their pants down."

"I heard different." Happy was used to Red's pessimism, and was far from satisfied. The germ of unrest remained.

In fact, Ed Thomas, watching the farm's temperature, sensed the spread of the infection and became worried. If he were to have any peace of mind left, he must learn the truth about the creamery. He asked Steve, and Steve was belligerent.

"I been tellin' everyone that's a goddam lying story—and it is."

This was relieving. "You've talked with the boys then?"

"Damn right. And told 'em I'd fire the first that walked out."

Ed frowned. "Then there's been actual talk of—"

"They won't—no matter what they say. I'm boss down there and the boys know it. You don't have to worry, see? I can handle 'em!"

He sounded sure, but—oddly—Ed's tension had returned twofold.

By Thursday everyone was talking strike. In the barns, Pop Haas and Dick Flemhos decided they had lived on nothing for long enough; if the drivers were underpaid at forty dollars a week, they certainly were at fifteen. They would do something about it. Many others, not so eager for personal action, urged the drivers to include general farm grievances in their bill of complaints. They wanted their houses painted and repaired, their leaky roofs fixed, their plaster patched.

And Allie Ochs said quite seriously: "We ought to ask 'em to lower the price of butter too."

Others thought in larger terms. Kate Cooper wanted a new heating system; Luella Walsh, a new kitchen stove; Blanche Ochs, her water closet repaired. The drivers were embarrassed with a deluge of irrelevant requests.

And then on Friday morning a new storm broke: it became definite that the creamery was walking out despite Steve's opposition. Blanche Ochs had it from Larry: the boys were asking a twenty-five per cent raise, and if Steve didn't like it, he knew what he could do.

What Steve did was to descend on the creamery in wrath, raking Larry publicly over the coals. Larry mumbled, stammered, and disavowed the statement though Blanche emphatically called him a liar as soon as she heard. Steve lit into the boys too, though they also professed ignorance. After Steve had gone, however, there were knowing looks. H'm—a twenty-five per cent raise!—not bad. Not bad at all!

The farm divided sharply. Many, including Steve's wife, believed he had met insubordination at last; Allie claimed that she hadn't at first, but Steve had thrown such a fit when he heard that now she did. Others scoffed and said it was an act.

Steve saw Ed Thomas again that Friday afternoon. "Those goddam fools," he said furiously, "they won't get away with it. They're crazy in the head! I can't find out a damn thing; not a lousy one of 'em admits anything is up, but there is! I can feel 'em grinning behind my back, the goddam—"

"What are we going to do?" Thomas asked. The strain and uncertainty of the week, climaxed now by confirmation of his worst fears, had left their mark. He was white and drawn with sleeplessness.

"I don't know," Steve said. "If I knew the ringleader, I'd fire him. It may be Vliet, but I'm not sure. If you say so, I'll fire the lot."

"Oh, let's not ask for trouble. We want to plan first."

"All right. But here's what I'll do. I'll take each of those bastards aside and talk turkey to him. You leave it to me. I'll handle it."

Thomas was encouraged. Steve Ochs was strong, a man to lean on if not to trust. "All right, try it. But keep in touch with me."

He felt that the plant man was on his side, but Wharton Pettitt, who had dealt with Steve's bookkeeping, was skeptical. "He's playing both ends against the middle," he muttered. "Don't trust him."

"But what is his game, What? What does he want?"

This, the bookkeeper did not know; and it was the weakness of his warning. The stake Steve was actually gambling for would have left him amazed, for in his mind there was but one person who stood a chance of succeeding Ed Thomas, and that was himself. Still, he was sure Steve was not to be trusted.

"The creamery wouldn't act without his orders," he insisted. "It's under his thumb."

Ed's nagging doubts were stirred; but all Pettitt's sarcasm and contempt could not persuade him to act, to fire both Barchi and Steve out of hand. He dreaded precipitating trouble and, moreover, wanted desperately to believe that Steve was with him.

Amos Vliet, in the meanwhile, lay low. He was content with the way events were shaping up though Steve Ochs's effortless, almost careless, way of running things annoyed him. It would be a pleasure, he thought, to use Steve's incriminating contract against him when the moment came.

Steve hailed him as he left work that Friday afternoon, and the two paused to chat in the middle of the drive where the whole farm could see them. Amos took it as bravado, but Steve had his reasons: he wanted Ed Thomas to know he was carrying out his promise to tackle the boys individually; and he also hoped talking to Amos first might label him as Number One striker.

He was casual: "I hear Barchi and Myhychyk are calling on Thomas Monday. Someone from the creamery oughta be with them."

"Don't tell me we're striking after all!"

"Why, no! But who'd spread that damned story unless it was the drivers? Now we don't want 'em to get up there behind closed doors and rope us into anything, do we?"

Most of Steve's talk had three angles: there was what he actually said, what he intended his hearer to gather, and what he had deep in his mind,



back of both. What he said now made sense, but he wanted Amos to gather almost exactly the opposite.

"You want me to go?" Vliet asked. "What am I supposed to do? Sit and listen and not say much? . . . Of course if the farm insisted we take a twenty-five per cent raise, you wouldn't make me turn it down more'n twice, would you?"

Steve grinned. "Well—no."

"Be pretty ticklish—without admitting it's a strike."

"Mm," Steve admitted blandly. "Any guy smart enough to pull it off'd be smart enough to run the plant, almost."

Amos found it easy to look startled over that. It was an offer he had not expected, and one that tempted him. But it was, he decided an instant later, one not too difficult to see through. Someone from the creamery had to be with Barchi and Myhychyk to maintain the fiction of the plant's participation in the strike, and Amos was probably the only one who might handle such a tricky job. So Steve was making a virtue of necessity; he was trusting Amos with it as he had had to trust him with the letter Barchi had demanded, but he was using the occasion to tie him definitely and irrevocably with the strikers. The promised reward was merely bait. Once Amos went to a strike conference he would forfeit the trust of the farm and would be Steve's man forever, hog-tied.

Amos thought it was pretty cute, but he said, "O.K., I'll try."

On Saturday morning, Gerald Melius himself came to the office. He had heard trouble was brewing; Eastern Dairies had called, ostensibly for confirmation, but perhaps to put a bug in his ear.

"Eastern Dairies, uh?" Ed Thomas sighed. "Things get around! I guess it's true, Jerry. I understand they're coming to me Monday with demands."

"Well, well! . . . And who's striking? The whole farm?"

"Drivers and creamery, so I understand."

"Why? Wages, hours, the usual things? . . . Have they a case?"

Thomas was grateful for the question. It was one which had bothered him, yet which few at the farm had asked. "The creamery, maybe yes. They're good men—semiskilled—and their pay is low. About twenty a week. Their hours used to be all right; but with business growing they've stretched, and it'll be worse before it's better. We don't pay overtime, and until we get the new creamery with its better equipment—" He shrugged.

"And the drivers?"

"I've less sympathy with them. At least one earns forty-five to fifty a week, and they all could if they'd work at it. Lots of places pay less. The hours are long, yes, and they've a few other justified kicks, but—"

"Can we afford to pay them more?"

"Ye-es. Those two departments perhaps. But if the rest of the farm jumped on the bandwagon, it'd jeopardize our share of the new cream-ery."

"Which was approved only on condition that you paid your share."

"I know. And I won't give it up. Because, if I do, it's the end of our growth, and a place can't stand still. We've been over that."

"Well, if we can't pay more, what about cutting hours?"

"That means hiring more men. A salesman and collector for the routes. Extra help downstairs. We can't afford that either."

"Humph! What will you do, then? Sounds like you're in a spot."

"Try to—well—appease them with minor concessions."

"Could you crack down? Break it up? Fire the ringleaders?"

"I don't know. It might mean immediate trouble."

"Well, it's your baby," Melius said. "I'll stand behind whatever you do, and my own policy is clear: I want no profit here—I don't need it; I want to put everything, down to the last emergency margin, back into the business—in expansion or wages or both." His florid face unsmiling, he added: "On the other hand, I don't want to lose any more; I've dropped enough at this dairy. We've got to stay in the black, Ed. Remember that."

Thomas was not likely to forget. The lines, he thought, were now clearly drawn. He must win—or else!—even though the strikers seemed to hold all the cards. Well, he would pin his hopes on Steve Ochs, who had never yet missed a delivery. Beyond that he had, as yet, no plan.

Monday would be the first test.

## X

IN THE midst of the growing tension over the strike, Hack Dunty called at the office. Wharton Pettit vaguely remembered the face, but Dunty had to identify himself as Isaac Ledmuller's route man.

Thomas, worried and upset after his talk with Melius, would not see him, but Hack was satisfied to talk to the bookkeeper:

"You come down to Isaac's with Thomas, didn't you? Sure you did. Well, I'll talk to you, and you can talk to him when he's got time."

The big, bird-breasted fat man with the tiny features crowded together at the front of his broad-checked face had trouble getting to the point. He disliked working for Ledmuller, he said; Isaac paid little and was a tyrant; his milk stank; Hack, with a wife and two kids, could stand the uncertainties no longer.

Finally he got there: he wanted a job with Weyland Meadows.

Petitt said, "There's no route open, but next time we cut one—"

"Well, I'd bring my route with me, see?"

"You mean Ledmuller's?"

"Most of 'em are friends of mine. They take Ledmuller's milk because I work for him, but it's an awful job keepin' 'em sold on the junk. They'd be glad to change to yours."

Petitt regarded him bleakly. Drivers did have personal influence with certain customers and could take them from one company to another when they changed jobs; but most drivers overestimated the number they could control.

"Even granting you could bring your whole route, we wouldn't touch it, Dunty. Too much like stealing."

"Uh? Isaac owes you money. Take the route to pay the bill."

"He's no man to monkey with. He'd fight it. And we wouldn't have a leg to stand on legally, ethically, or morally."

"Why the hell not?" Dunty demanded hotly. "Ain't I got a right to change jobs? Ain't my customers got a right to change milk? Can Isaac kick if we both change to Weyland Meadows?"

The bookkeeper shrugged. "That's not how I look at it. We can't touch it."

"I'll come back to talk to Thomas," Dunty threatened.

"By all means. But he'll only answer you as I have."

## XI

STEVE OCHS was not so sure of himself as Amos imagined. He was pleased enough with events: the farm's excitement, the uncertainty, strain, and disagreement in the office were exactly what he wanted; his own position was on record, and he had Ed Thomas's confidence; the groundwork was laid for the strike's collapse, and there was nothing to

do but feed the tension, strengthen Thomas's dilemma, and keep him inactive with promises until it was too late for him to act on his own. By next Sunday the situation should look hopeless. Then Steve could step in, prick the bubble he had blown, leaving Thomas full and public credit, and the manager would fall all over himself in gratitude.

It should be simple, and yet Steve, for no reason, was uneasy.

He knew that, even if he failed of his major goal and Thomas got no offer from Eastern Dairies, his own position would still be improved. He would have new influence, and getting Friedman the order of equipment for the new creamery should be in the bag; the commission on it was worth this finagling alone.

And still he was uneasy.

The only thing that could go wrong was that damned contract he had given Amos Vliet; in it, ambition had tricked him into a foolish risk. Still, he was making it worth Vliet's while to play ball, and the bottler could have no idea of the sort of paper he was holding anyway. Sometime during the coming week he must ask for that paper back, using all his subtlety and, if necessary, all the pressure he could bring to bear. That would be the moment on which the future turned; but there was no need to be afraid of it—Vliet would know where his bread was buttered.

By next Sunday the game would be played out, the prize his. In some moods, however, a week is long to wait.

For once, moreover, it was not Steve's privilege to choose the time. Amos Vliet made the choice, and it was not next Sunday, but this Sunday. Now. Tonight. The moment had come to go to Thomas with Steve's letter, and all that remained to do first was spin Barchi a yarn and give him his chance to get out from under.

At closing time Sunday, Amos hailed Steve as he was passing through the creamery and asked if the office was open. "I gotta make a phone call. Lemme borrow your passkey."

"I'm going to the storeroom. I'll let you in."

They went up together, and Steve opened the office door. "Sure it's locked behind you afterwards," he said.

He did his errand, and when he came out, Amos was at Matlock's desk, phoning. He was all agrin, and the few low-voiced words Steve caught suggested he was talking to a girl.

Steve went downstairs, hesitating on the cement stoop outside. As he did so, some sound overhead attracted his attention to the open case-

ment of Ed Thomas's office; and behind its opaque screening he caught a flicker of movement. Only after his eyes had dropped did it dawn on him that it could only be Amos, and that he must have rushed from the telephone to the inner office. Why? Why but to make sure that Steve had actually gone? But that would mean—

Steve's skin chilled. As though making up his mind, he trotted down the steps, around the corner, and into the empty ice-cream room. Not pausing, he circled through the bottling room back to the platform, stopping against the wooden windscreen only a step or two farther from the open window than he had been before but invisible now from upstairs.

And presently Amos's voice, hushed to occasional indistinctness, drifted down to him: "Who's talking? . . . O.K. This is Vliet. . . . Yeah—I'm afraid so. We gotta talk it over. . . . No, not by phone; I'm in the office."

The rasping voice in the receiver was audible, almost recognizable.

"Yeah. About that, and about him too. Looks like trouble. . . . No—better not. He's been wandering around all afternoon. I'm coming in town. . . . Where? . . . O.K. When? . . . O.K., Lew; see ya."

Steve's stomach contracted as though a hand had gripped and wrung it; but it was the nausea of swift anger. He would beat Vliet's head off!

Bounding onto the stoop, he pulled open the screen, raced up the stairs two at a time, and reached the office almost before the startled bottler had put down the telephone. Vliet rose quickly, warily, his fists clenched and knuckle-white against the top of the desk. Realizing that the bottler was hard and tough and much younger than himself, Steve abruptly abandoned violence for guile:

"Say, I forgot— Glad you're still here."

"Forgot what?"

"That envelope Barchi and I gave you."

Amos Vliet's eyes flickered downward in what he took to be confusion.

"I want it back."

Steve rocked confidently on his heels, hands in pockets, a grin plastered on his face; but the cockiness was superficial.

"Thought I was supposed to hold it till September 10th?" Amos said.

They were playing a game: Steve acting as though he could manage Amos, much as he doubted it; Amos sparring for time, wondering how much Steve had overheard and whether this was to be a showdown.

"The bet's been called off."

"Oh! . . . Well, all right—if Barchi O.K.'s it."

"I'm telling you. Give!"

"Aw, hell, Steve, if it's a bet, I can't pay off on your say-so—"

"No? Think again. Who can do you most good around here? Barchi or me?" Steve paused. "I want that envelope."

Amos regarded him levelly. "I see. So we're out from behind the whiskers? O.K. I haven't got it with me"—he paused in his turn—"and wouldn't give it to you if I had!"

Steve said, "I get that envelope, boy, or you're out of work."

"No—because I know what's in it."

Steve sucked in his breath. His dark face was purplish, and his eyes were raging; but he held himself in hand. Amos had straightened his shoulders and relaxed his hands, but was watchful, balancing on the balls of his feet, ready for anything.

"So!" Steve said, adding it up. "You and Barchi are in this together, uh? Sure you are. Barchi wouldn't let a creamery man have that envelope otherwise. I should've known. . . . All right. Barchi wants his strike. What is it you want?"

"Oh, a twenty-five per cent raise—and your job!"

Steve winced. "I promised you that already—when I'm manager."

"I've worked under you long enough, Steve. I won't any more. After this I couldn't. You never liked me much, and you'll hate me now. I'd get scalped eleven ways from the eight ball. So I want you out of here. I want my chance to deal with Thomas direct."

"You goddam fool!" Steve talked while his mind raced. "Suppose you get me fired. What good 'll it do? Y' haven't a prayer of getting my job." He sensed Amos's bleak hardness, and the very fact that one of his men was standing up to him after all this time brought a presentiment of defeat; but he had not given up. "D'you think they know you from a hole in the ground? Huh? They'll go outside for a new plant man. Sure you can get me fired. Easy. Just take that paper to Thomas. But you'll label yourself 'snitcher' if you do, and Ed ain't giving no plant managership to one of them. He'll go outside, I tell you."

"Maybe." Amos flushed slightly.

"Me, I'm offering it to you cold. Without strings."

"No soap."

"Use your head. Play my game, and your job's in the bag."

"I'd rather be bottler with you gone, Steve, than plant man with you boss. If nothing works out but getting you fired, that's still swell with me."

Steve stared at him. "Holy Jesus!" After a minute he added in desperation: "Barchi'll love you for this. You know that."

Amos chuckled. "I wouldn't care if he did—but after I finish talking to him, it'll be you he loves. Guess why!"

Steve stood in sweating silence. Once he slapped fist into palm. "O.K. So you got me. So what?"

"So nothing. Sit tight while things work out."

"You might give me a chance to quit. That wouldn't hurt you any. It'll be tough finding another job if I'm fired."

"That's your hard luck."

Steve scowled. "For a chance to quit on my own, I might put in a word for you with Thomas 'fore I left."

Amos hesitated over that, and Steve, not waiting, acted—stepping to the telephone and dialing Operator. "I want to speak to J. Crull Robinson," he said, "vice president of Eastern Dairies. Don't know his home address, but his office is New York."

While they waited for the call to come through, Amos tried to decide if this were wise. He had no desire to smash Steve utterly, but, knowing him, he was suspicious.

He had not decided when Steve spoke. "Mr. Robinson? This is Steve Ochs at Weyland Meadows. Remember we talked awhile back about my taking a job with you people?"

A heavy voice boomed in the receiver. "Ochs? Yes. I remember you."

"You said you'd hold the job for me till the first of the year in case I changed my mind. Well, I have."

There was a gap. Then the voice boomed: "Hear you people have labor trouble. Any connection?"

"Yeah," Steve said. "It was coming when I talked to you before. I couldn't say so, but that was why I didn't jump at your offer; didn't want to leave the boys here in the lurch. Well, it came, but it's settled. I settled it five minutes before I got on the phone to you."

"Good! Glad to hear it!" The voice was hearty now. "If that's so, the job's yours. When can you start?"

"Tomorrow."

Robinson laughed. "Can't build you an office that soon. I'll be down later in the week with a contract and bond, and we'll settle it."

Steve hung up and thrust out his hand. "Now, that letter—"

Amos shook his head. "Not till you've quit and put in that good word."

Every line of Steve's face was iron. After a moment he turned on his heel and went out.

When he had gone, Amos picked up an envelope that lay on the desk. If Steve had seen it, would he have tried to take it by force? He had been a fool to have it with him—even more of a fool to doodle with it while he talked to Barchi; but Steve had been too busy getting out of a tight corner to notice.

A slow grin broadened Amos's round face.

And wasn't it like Steve to fall catlike on his feet?

Steve was waiting for Ed Thomas in the office Monday morning.

"What's wrong now? More trouble?"

Steve grinned. "You may think so: I'm quitting."

The manager gaped and went slowly white, while Steve watched with sadistic humor: Thomas would be thinking that his last support had been withdrawn and he was left to face the strike alone. He let him think so momentarily.

"Eastern Dairies give me the chance to manage one of their metropolitan branch plants. Two-twenty-five a month plus house and a chance of promotion. Too good to turn down."

"But, Steve! To leave now—with this strike—Good Lord, you can't!"

"Oh, the strike!" Steve made a careless gesture. "Me and another guy fixed it so the creamery'd quit; and Barchi can't do nothing alone. You're all set. This other fella wants a little something I'll tell you about later."

With the same mocking humor he studied Ed's staggering relief.

The news exploded across the farm, its double-barreled nature making it the greatest sensation since Thomas's appointment as manager three years before. The fizzling of the strike would have caused talk enough; Steve's leaving, on top of it, spread confusion and rumor and stirred deep emotions.

In the creamery, there was consternation, less at the profitless end of the strike than at the loss of Steve. The boys were grudgingly glad that he was getting a better job at more money, but were bewildered and sincerely shaken by his abrupt departure. Their feelings were so deeply real that—as Amos realized wryly—if it had been a case of Steve's being fired there might have been serious trouble.

Elsewhere on the farm people said, "The lucky bum!" Not only was Steve escaping from Weyland Meadows, he was getting his salary



doubled for doing it. A few shook their heads, asking bitterly what Steve had done to deserve it; but most were envious and vicariously proud, for his success seemed to prove their own ability and worth: Steve had always been less a part of the administration than of the farm, and his co-workers were glad that it was he and not Ed Thomas whom Eastern Dairies had honored.

The route men, for their part, forewarned by Barchi who had been forewarned by Amos, crept in Monday afternoon, sheepish but quite definitely relieved. Tom North capitalized on the failure by coming in early and going straight to Thomas to ask for the house that Steve was vacating.

For the office, after the first devastating relief which left Thomas as weak as a prisoner reprieved at the gallows and Pettitt silently bitter about Thomas's luck, the problem of filling Steve's job soon overshadowed the strike's end. Both agreed that no one from the plant could handle it, yet neither knew, offhand, of an outsider they could get. Once the news got around, of course, they might be swamped with suggestions from dealer-acquaintances and with applications; but the immediate future had the aspects of a problem.

"When does Steve leave?" Pettitt growled.

"Maybe the end of the week. It's the end of the month, too."

"Doesn't give us much time, and it's not two weeks' notice! What are we going to do if we can't find anyone?"

"I don't know. Put someone from the plant in charge temporarily? Vliet, perhaps? I'd thought of him."

"Good God, he's only nineteen and a younger edition of Steve. We don't want any more of that type."

This question soon spread to the farm, and opinion was divided. It was felt that no one from the plant could adequately fill Steve's shoes, and yet people resented the job's going to an outsider. However, once they had grasped that, of all the creamery boys, only Ihloff and Larry were really from the farm itself, they became resigned.

On Wednesday, J. Crull Robinson arrived, talked jovially with Thomas and Pettitt, waved papers under Steve's nose. He was impressive, the farm decided; you could tell he belonged to a real company, and Steve was lucky to be going with him. You could see how he considered this a one-horse place, and it was whispered that in the office he had kidded about a day not too far distant when Eastern Dairies might put its trucks into town. The farm heard this with awe and foreboding, for it was obvious that a small place like Weyland Meadows

would be run out of the state if it tried to buck the competition of gigantic Eastern Dairies.

Steve's time ended at noon on Saturday, the last day of the month. A moving van stood in front of his house all morning, and by dark the Ochses would have gone, bag and baggage. Such was the week's rush of events that the farm watched in dumb amazement, scarcely believing.

About two o'clock, Steve came to Amos. "Ha 'bout it, boy? Here's my last check from the farm, here's my contract with Eastern Dairies signed, sealed, and delivered; step outside, and you can see my furniture leaving my house. . . . Satisfied?"

"You put in a good word for me upstairs?" Vliet asked.

"I even done that. Won' do you no good, though: the office says it's goin' outside for a plant man. But ask 'em if I didn't."

Amos nodded. A mild ache of disappointment gnawed him, but he knew he could have hoped for no more, that he had gambled for no more. He fished an envelope from an inner pocket. "No hard feelings?"

Steve ripped it to verify the contents. "Hard feelings? Hell, no! The more I think about it, the funnier it all gets. I didn't know a guy could do to me what you did. But what the hell? I got a better job at a better salary, and before long maybe I'll be manager at a better place. I should thank you, pal!"

He had not yet said goodbye when the bottling was done and the creamery cleaned, so the boys, by tacit consent, drifted to the edge of the dock for a smoke. They were a silent lot and looked punished, sullen. Even Amos, now that the moment had come, felt sorry, for with Steve would go something that no other plant man could bring to that creamery.

He arrived at last, striding onto the platform as though going somewhere in a terrible hurry. Stopping short at sight of them, he snarled, "Damn it, you guys sitting around on your fannies again?"

"We're through work," Frenchy muttered. "We got a right to."

"Then whyn't you go home?"

Holding his cigarette aloft, Ihloff said, "We stopped for a smoke."

Steve stood over them rocking on his heels, his three-cornered grin mocking. "Maybe it's O.K. anyway: I can say goodbye to all of you at once, tell ya a piece of good news I heard."

"What's that?" Manny asked.

Steve said, "We worked together quite a while, you guys 'n' me. You done as good as any gang could, working with the junk you got in

there. I been tough with you, but a boss has ta be, and you ain't been bad to work with—a little dumb sometimes, but that's a' right."

There was embarrassed movement; Manny Zapeto and Larry crawled awkwardly to their feet, unable to sit still; there were isolated murmurs as the boys tried to speak and some glanced Amos's way, but Amos pretended not to notice, not wanting to be their spokesman.

Ihloff said meaninglessly, "Aw, that's all right, Steve! Hell!"

Steve watched with patent amusement. "You guys use your hands better'n your tongues," he said. "That's O.K. So do I. I got only a couple of things to say: one is, give your next manager the same co-operation you give me; that's an order, God damn it. My last."

Frenchy said, "Sure, Steve, sure—when we get one."

"You got one now."

There was a stir of interest.

"Yeah. They figured first to have someone from the plant run things till they found the guy they wanted." Steve's eyes flicked toward Amos, in whom a dazed half-hope stirred suddenly. "That won't be necessary now. You got your new boss. They picked him this afternoon—and he'll be a surprise to you." Vliet, sensing the derision at last, felt his new hope plummet as Steve repeated deliberately, "Yes, sir, some of you'll be surprised, maybe; but a good choice has been made, and I want you to stick by him, help him, obey his orders just as you obeyed mine. . . . There he is, right there: my brother Larry."

Obviously awaiting the announcement, Larry squirted tobacco juice toward the edge of the platform and looked self-consciously modest. Grinning sheepishly, he dried his hands on a dirty apron. "Aw, hell! The boys know I can't live up to you, Steve, but they'll help me out."

There was incredulous, disappointed silence. Whatever the boys had expected, it was not this, and the words of congratulation that Steve and Larry were awaiting did not come.

Instead, Amos laughed. It was a wholehearted whoop of laughter that froze Larry's smile and narrowed Steve's eyes to pinpoints.

Trusting Steve for two hours had been too much! Served him right, Amos thought, and it was downright funny. The completeness of Steve's victory, as he thought it over, the slickness of it, tickled him irresistibly even though the joke was on himself, and the laughter was deep and honest.

Dimly he was aware of shocked expressions: they thought, of course, that he was laughing at Larry's appointment. He wasn't; but if he had thought about it he might have been, for that was pretty funny too!

## PART III

### I

"OH, FREDA, come on. You must know. It's true, isn't it?"

"But I don't," Freda Ellis protested. "Nobody told me anything about it. I thought daddy was at work. See: I'm even getting lunch for him. You mean he won't be back till night?"

"Not if he's gone where I think he has," Sonia Goetz said; "and I'm so sure of it I'm going right ahead organizing a party for them. So, Freda, will you do something for me? Meet them here when they get here and see that they come to my house? Everybody'll be there. And of course you'll come with them."

"Oh, I—I—can't."

Freda looked frightened. She bore few visible scars from her summer's experience, but Sonia, appearing suddenly at the kitchen door a few minutes earlier, had noticed her first panicky impulse toward flight; now there was this reluctance to come to the party. That was all. Otherwise, she had seemed comfortable enough, speaking easily, warmly, showing excitement over the news.

The woman did not press her. "Of course, do as you please. But the invitation is open if you change your mind."

"I—I— Thank you very much, but I don't think—I'm sorry. I—"

"That's all right. But promise me you'll see that Swan and the others get there. I'm inviting everybody. All the drivers, Ed, Whart, Charlie Dann, the Coopers—oh, everybody! And it'd be just awful if the guests of honor didn't show up. Promise!"

"Oh, I will! I'd be glad to. Oh, gee! It sounds wonderful. I do hope you're right, but—but it's so hard to believe. Cousin Bet eloping and—and we not knowing anything about it— Oh, we've never known each other too well, even when she worked at the office, but— Why, I didn't even know she knew him. At least not that well! Are you sure—"

"Positive," Sonia said. "Bet came out to the house and asked to spend the night, and I've never seen anyone so excited."

"Did she admit she was eloping?"

"No, but she made a remark about Hal's not getting away from her this time that was almost as good. And then this morning Hal brought his truck in early, and he and your father came for her in your father's car, and they all went off together. I'm sure it's an elopement, and the farm's just got to celebrate it!"

"But will they be coming back? If they go over the state line to Buckton, won't they just go off on a trip somewhere?"

"They'll be back, because Hal's car is still parked outside the garage. I admit I'm puzzled, though, because he hasn't even asked to get off from work tonight. Just the same, I'm sure I'm right. It *is* an elopement. And you've got to do your part helping get them to the party."

"Oh, I will," Freda said eagerly. "I will! I'd be glad to."

It was eight-thirty before Swan Ellis's car reached home; but Freda, watching for it, was on the back stoop almost before it stopped. Swan was alone in the front seat, but the other two were in back, half visible in the dusk.

She cried, "Are you—did you—"

There was no immediate answer, and the breathless girl had time to think it queer before Swan said: "Yes, you can be the first to congratulate them—they're Mr. and Mrs. Roane now."

"Oh, gee!" Freda skipped down to their level. "Sonia thought that's what you were doing. Gee! I'm glad. She's giving a party for you. You're supposed to go over right away. We were expecting you almost half an hour ago—"

Bet said softly: "Guess I didn't fool her any. But her giving a party for us— Gee, that's swell! You mind going over, Hal, for—for a while?" The soft, husky way she spoke made Freda shiver.

Hal's cold voice was harsh. "Oh, sure—*anything*!"

"Better face it," Swan said impassively. "Get it over."

"All right, all right." Then: "Maybe they'll gimme a drink."

"Bet, it's—it's wonderful," Freda began, "your—your running off like this and— It's simply wonderful! I hope you'll be awfully happy."

Bet's laugh was warm and soft. "I couldn't help but be."

Swan said: "You coming with us, Freda? Were you asked?"

"Oh, yes, but—but I don't think I will. I—don't want to."

As Swan sat silently motionless Hal said, jeering: "Why not *make* her, Swan? You're good at that!"

But the farm man ignored him. "All right, Freda." And then, putting the car in gear, "I won't be late; it's the middle of the week."

Freda went indoors and into the front room, not turning on the lights. From there, feeling lonely and left behind, she watched her father's car reach Larry Ochs's corner and turn left down the dirt road toward Goetz's. She would have gone with them if Swan had insisted, and she almost wished he had; but Swan had insisted on nothing in the two months since she had left the hospital.

"She'll readjust," Mat Caron had said, casually; "but give her time. Don't make her do things before she's ready."

Swan had not agreed, feeling that loneliness could too easily become a habit, bringing loss of the trick of social contacts; but he had obeyed without protest, for his faith in his own judgment had been shaken.

There had been nothing in the interval to relieve his doubts; Freda had scarcely left the house. Indeed, she herself had begun to wonder if leaving the decision to her had been a wise course, because she seemed to lack the stamina to take the initiative. Though taking care of the house and the boys occupied her hands, her mind, and her time, loneliness gripped her at intervals; and she longed for the courage to make a break. This was as Dr. Caron had said it would be. He had also said that in time the courage would come; but she wondered.

Tonight the longing was so persistent that with a little urging she might have gone with the others. In the excitement of Bet's marriage, her own presence at the party might go unnoticed; but she could not persuade herself to go—she was still afraid of people though, in the past weeks, she had met several quite uneventfully when Swan's friends came to the house, or when she had to go to the creamery. People in groups, however, she still avoided—and, in particular, the farm women.

Once she went among them again, there would be more talk. Briefly at least, old speculations would be dragged out for a final airing, old sores reopened. There would be talk about her attempt at suicide (of which she was bitterly ashamed though knowing it for an act born of sickness) and about other things, older things (which she would mind less, thanks to Mat Caron).

The young doctor, whom the farm almost exclusively patronized, had given Freda a great deal of time, sitting with her by the half-hour, chatting offhand about the dairy, about Swan, about herself, winning her confidence and liking and, incidentally, setting in perspective for her the series of events which had brought her under his care. When he judged the time right, he went further. Freda never quite knew how it happened; but, after the first hot flush of realizing what he was talking about, she found him so casual that it was hard to be even

decently embarrassed. Intending to leave no hidden corner of ignorance where half-knowledge, curiosity, or imagination might fester again, he told her categorically what she and Mickey Pratt were supposed to have done; and her first reaction was incredulity bordering on amazement.

"Why!" she gasped. "Why—nothing like that happened. He didn't even suggest— Why, if he'd tried, I'd 've been petrified."

Caron grinned at her. "Sure. But don't go away with any wrong ideas just because a bunch of catty ladies talked about you. There may have been envy back of their condemnation."

The real problem, as he saw it, was to send her home freed not only from the terrors of ignorance but from the shame and loathing with which her experiences had surrounded the whole subject of sex. Perhaps he drilled excessively on this, or perhaps the danger had not been as acute as he had thought, for Freda returned home not only less fearful but with a spark of curiosity glowing within her. Her old day-dreams of rose-tinted romance and impersonally beautiful marriage had faded, and in their place were new and more concrete anticipations.

Now in the dusk by the window, Freda was remembering, savoring, the huskiness of her cousin Bet's voice in the car, recalling that today the girl had been married to Hal Roane, realizing that tonight the two of them would be doing those things of which she and Mickey Pratt had been accused. She had heard—and understood—the anticipation of it in the way Bet had spoken— Just thinking of those deep, low tones made her restless.

After a while, she left the window and turned on the lights.

At Ben Goetz's, the air was heavy and sweet with the odor of apple, blue with smoke, and voices ebbed and flowed in a dizzying, unpleasant roar. The boys had Hal Roane in the kitchen, and the women had Bet in the living room; and both groups were hilariously noisy. Hal, tired of it, downed the last of his third drink, hoisted himself off the table where he was sitting, and said, "I got to go."

"Hell, it's early! What's your hurry?" Larry Ochs giggled at his own humor. "Christ, can'tcha wait?"

"One more drink," Ben cried.

"I gotta be on the route by three," Hal said sullenly.

Lew Barchi cried: "Look: 's my night off, but I'll work so Bill Bevis can take your route, huh? We can't ruin a honeymoon—"

"To hell with it!" Hal said. "I'd get docked a day."

"Make you a weddin' present," Barchi insisted, obviously tight.

But Hal shoved his way toward the hall.

Barchi said, "Jesus, the guy's squirrely!"

The talk in the living room was part and parcel of the same stuff. Unobserved in the doorway, Hal listened coldly, grimness thinning his lips, while the men flowed into the hall behind him; then he spoke his wife's name sharply, cutting into the confusion.

"Bet! Get your hat. Come on."

Bet's breath caught. Color and smile fading, she whispered weakly, "All right, Hal." To Sonia she stammered, "It was—was wonderful of you to—to take this trouble for us. I'm sorry we have to go, but—"

"You've only just come!" Sonia cried. "I do wish you could stay awhile longer—but I understand. The rest of us'll celebrate for you."

"Please! And—thanks ever so much. It's been—it was—"

"Come on," Hal said.

His car was at the creamery, and they were escorted to it noisily. Bet wanted to run and be chased and make a flying getaway, but Hal walked methodically. When they reached the car, he got behind the wheel, leaving it to others to take Bet around and help her in. Starting the motor, he backed into the drive without a glance behind and so suddenly that Tom North and Ben, who were fastening tin cans to the rear bumper, had to jump. For just a second the gayety was dampened; but then rice began chattering against the car as it pulled away, and Bet's goodbyes were lost in the boisterous roar of the farm's benediction.

In town, they left the car at the garage and walked to Hal's apartment. Bet had pictured a boarding house, with Hal sharing a single room with one or two other men; but he proved to have a small flat in a semisuburban, two-story, modern brick building. Somehow it surprised her. As he let her in and they climbed the stairs, she could hear a radio playing dance music somewhere above and had an impulse to tiptoe, feeling as though she were creeping to an illicit rendezvous instead of coming as a wife to her new home.

She hesitated as her husband unlocked a door, shoved it open, and motioned her in. "You ought to carry me over," she whispered.

With a cold look, he growled, "What? Where'd ya get that idea?"

"Out of advertisements. All brides get carried—"

"Go on. Get in."

Bet walked in, feeling hurt.

He had living room, kitchen, bedroom, and bath, and obviously the Roanes would need something less expensive if both were to live on his commission. Still it was nice. There was some need for dusting



and sweeping, but the rooms were neat, the windows curtained, the floors rug-covered; it was not quite as she had pictured bachelor quarters.

The door slamming behind her set excitement rippling beneath her skin. Hal went through to the bedroom, and she followed slowly, shy and reluctant, wishing he had paused to take her coat and hat, or perhaps mix her another drink; but he was an odd person, and she knew she must take him as he was. Hesitating on the threshold, watching him put his things away and hang his suit coat in the closet, she felt some of the reluctance seeping out of her; but it was still hard to realize that they were actually married and it was all right for her to be in his apartment.

From his bureau he got a clean white coverall and shook loose its folds before tossing it over the back of a chair. Without a glance at her, he shucked out of his pants. She had a sudden impulse to slip into the living room and wait while he undressed, but reminded herself again that she could watch him now without shame.

Methodically he hung his trousers in the closet. Beneath his shirt-tails were brown-purple-and-white striped shorts; and his bare knees were bony, gnarled, and hard-looking, his legs dark with hair. Bet's heart knocked in her throat, and her palms were damp. She thought: It'd be funny if I fainted.

Coming back from the closet, he picked up his driver's uniform and stepped into it. For a moment she hardly understood; indeed, as he guided the zipper up its front, she whispered incredulously, "But, Hal—"

He shoved past her, crossing the living room toward the door.

"But, Hal—you're not going out. Not tonight!"

"Sure. Why not?"

"But it's our—it's our first night—"

He said, "You had yours a hell of a while ago."

"Oh, but—Hal! That—that was different—"

"I'm going out for a beer. My route book and things are in the car, so I won't even wake you coming back. Sleep well!"

Every thought had been confidently anticipating this wedding night, even though instinct had warned and prepared her, and her disappointment was keen. She cried: "But, Hal—you can't! This is—"

"Why can't I? You've had what you wanted of me, haven't you? Marriage? All right: shut up! There's nothing I can do about it, so make yourself at home. But don't ask me to like it!"

"But, Hal— Why? I don't understand—"

"No? You think I got any use for a little tramp who gets herself in trouble and then can't take the rap?"

"Get *myself* in trouble—"

"Well, I didn't rape you, did I? Hell, no! You were only too anxious!"

"You wouldn't have taken me out again if I'd—if I hadn't—"

"Goddam right! But did you have to be taken? I didn't beg you. I never said I loved you or even liked you. I don't! I took it you were out for fun, the same as me—"

"Well, all right, Hal! But gee! What could I do when—"

"You could have gone to a doctor. You didn't have to get the help of that blasted uncle of yours and stick me with marriage!"

"But I don't know any doctor. And you just laughed when I told you about it."

"And why? 'Cause I thought you were lying. I still think so. I don't think you *can* be having a kid—and by God, if I'm right, I'll kill you. . . . Even if you are, how do I know it's mine? . . . All you wanted the whole time was marriage, and you got it, y' bitch! But if you think I'm going to lay with you again—ever—you're crazy as hell. All you'll get from me is this."

She barely saw it coming, as his palm cracked against cheek and temple and fire burst before her eyes. The blow threw her off balance, and she clutched instinctively for the door. Before she found it, the red world exploded again and she was on the floor. The room whirled blackly, dizzily; her head rang, and her face burned with pain. Then, as sight returned blurred with tears, she saw Hal looking at her from the doorway; and, for the first time in her memory, he was smiling.

## II

WHARTON PETITT said: "Hack Dunty's back, Ed. Ledmuller's driver. He came around three weeks ago, during the strike—"

Ed Thomas nodded. "I remember. What did he want?"

"To come to us with his route."

The young manager looked up sharply, eyes widening.

"I told him No."

"No? Good Lord—why?"

"It's Isaac's route, not Dunty's. We can't steal it."

"If the driver brings us the route, his customers must agree to the change—and they've a perfect right to change dairies, haven't they? Steal his route? Don't be ridiculous."

The bookkeeper said coldly: "Don't have any part of it, Ed. It's heading for trouble. Isaac's a bad man to cheat."

"Cheat? Now look here, Whart, I've a right to take on a new driver and any customers he can bring me. It's an established principle of the milk business. If you want further justification, there's Isaac's bill."

"You can't steal a man's car, even if he owes you the price of it."

"A route's different, but I won't argue it. Send Dunty in."

"At least call up Pete Thornburg—"

"I don't want a lawyer," the manager said abruptly. "Send him in."

### III

SEPTEMBER had come in bright and almost cold; but, as midmonth passed, it began to rain, and storm warnings were posted, the weather bureau talking cautiously of winds of possibly hurricane force. The rain was solid and soaking. Drivers checked in wet to the skin, and their trucks were covered with mud. People stayed indoors, and the farm's deserted bleakness was only accented by the solitary hunched figures of the few who had to be out. The lawns were a soggy morass.

At dusk of the second day the quiet, drenching violence of the down-pour promised to continue drearily through the night; but about nine o'clock a wind came up, and water began slatting heavily, irregularly against windowpanes, as though thrown from buckets, sifting down chimneys, driving through cracks borne by cold drafts while sashes rattled and whole houses shook and shuddered in the gusts.

The storm produced in Clint Matlock a gloomy depression; and this was not helped by the atmosphere of the Heim household, which had been strained since Mary's departure with a boy friend to see a movie. Even before the storm took its turn for the worse, Ida had been restless; now, with no sight of the youngsters, her worrying became aggressive. Adrian, dozing by the radio with a detective story magazine on his knee, took it placidly, but Clint had to grit his teeth.

Ida snapped, "Adrian! Are you listening? . . . Where is she then? She promised to be back by ten-thirty, and she's late."

"It's only a quarter to eleven," Adrian said. "She'll be back soon."

And Eunice protested, "Oh, mother, gee! Ten-thirty!"

"That's late enough. I've been so lenient, you girls think you can get away with anything, but it's going to stop. You'll learn to obey if I have to resort to old-fashioned thrashings—"

"Now, Ida," Adrian said, "don't fuss. She'll be back."

Clint reminded himself that any mother might worry about a daughter out in such a storm. The wind had become a gale; its pressure against the house was no longer spasmodic but general. Without anticipating danger, he felt the strain on the building and the sense of partial vacuum inside. Still he could not believe this was the only cause of Ida's worry.

No, she was bothered by Mary's being out with a boy.

Knowing the girl, Clint guessed there was cause but wished Ida would discriminate; the boy Mary had gone with tonight had seemed nice, and the kind she would do well to get acquainted with before it was too late. But Ida was afraid, and it affected her judgment. This ten-thirty business— As though a girl couldn't find trouble as easily, if she chose, before that hour as after!

The woman's worry took the form of anger; and Adrian's mild attempts to quiet her, Eunice's protests and pleading, only irritated her the more. Clint felt sorry for Adrian: a futile little man, faintly effeminate; a good enough carpenter, but not a fine workman; a jack-of-all-trades—a nonentity—on a dairy farm; a nonentity too in his own home. He wondered gloomily if Adrian had once held the promise of better things, and if so, what had held him back. An inherent fault of character? His wife? Or—Weyland Meadows Dairy?

Lips tight, Clint wished he knew.

He had picked Weyland Meadows as a growing company, one with a future. Well, it was growing; they had put on a six-hundred-quart metropolitan dealer in July, and the month of August—summer though it was—had set a new sales record for both routes and dealers. It was growing. But could its progress continue in the face of what Pettitt called "corporate indigestion"?

What was wrong with the place anyway?

Was it Ed Thomas's preoccupation with quantity instead of quality? Hardly inclusive enough, Clint thought.

Was it the fault of the department heads on whom Pettitt had laid the blame that first day?

But certainly Ed Thomas had not given them the leadership which cuts

through bickerings and jealousies and commands cooperation; he had failed to inspire them with the purpose and destiny of Weyland Meadows, and they lacked the sense of coming importance, of growth, which might have given them purpose and incentive. It would be easy to indict him too for neglect of employees, high-handedness, uncertainty, poor judgment. Perhaps it would be too easy.

Because the fault might well lie in the other direction: with the men. Ed had said, and Sonia Goetz had echoed him, that the people here lacked the potential to be anything but dairy hands, that water sought its own level.

This was something Clint had begun by denying, arguing that the farm's capacities had been deliberately left undeveloped, that neglect and actual repression were responsible for the discontent and unhappiness here.

But was that so? Was the situation at fault—or the people?

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars . . ."

Clint knew his judgment was swayed by a general dislike of the farm folk, a dislike that had been growing for weeks without becoming recognizable till recently. He could and would continue to get on with them, but no longer had any desire for more than casual acquaintance with any but a few.

The feeling had various roots. There was the way they talked. Clint could have borne, perhaps enjoyed, picturesque vulgarity; but the farm's was unimaginative, meaningless from repetition. Obscenities peppered the most casual conversations and popped up unnoticed even in mixed company. Moreover, there was the tiny circle of their interests: complaints, household trivia, and sex, as Thomas had put it; Clint would have added "shop." More fundamental was their lack of vision, their inability to get beyond themselves and their petty lives to work for a larger success, their blank unawareness of Weyland Meadows' future.

Clint had become frankly and personally afraid of them. An affair like August's abortive strike, undertaken purely because the drivers saw—or thought they saw—a chance to get something for nothing, could cripple the dairy and with it his own plans and hopes. If the threatened strike had been an honest expression of discontent arising from injustice, he might have understood, even sympathized; but it had not been. Even so he did not blame the drivers alone, for it could not have happened, he felt, if Ed Thomas had made some effort to inculcate faith and discipline among his men.

Perhaps he would have run into similar troubles in any business he

might have entered. Perhaps, he thought, what was happening here was a symptom, or more accurately a germ-tiny epitome, of the great restlessness of the twentieth century? Not that identifying Weyland Meadows' small troubles with vast movements was any help. If he was caught in the wave of the future, it was something he could not cope with. No, his problem was not of movements but of people; could not be solved by generalities, by platitudes about the dignity of labor, or the rights of men or of money, by catch phrases or broad principles. The problem at Weyland Meadows, one affecting him very closely, was whether Ed Thomas or Lew Barchi or someone else was fundamentally to blame for the unhealthiness of the place—and what ultimately could be done to cure it.

Clint's thoughts were gloomy and futile.

Mary and her friend did not get back till nearly eleven-thirty. The girl's hair and face were wet with rain; but color flamed in her usually pale cheeks, and she was excited, laughing, and alive, her sullen expression for once quite gone. She cried eagerly, "Golly, did we have a time!"

The boy with her said, "I'm sorry we're late, Mrs. Heim, but we had trouble." He was nineteen or twenty, medium-sized, with clean-cut face and earnest eyes behind glasses.

"Didn't I," Ida demanded, "tell you to be back by ten-thirty?"

"But we tried to, ma. We even left the picture before it was over. We left before ten, only—"

"You expect me to believe that? Or have you been sitting down a side road in a parked car ever since? If you have, you know what to expect—"

"We wouldn't do that, Mrs. Heim. You warned us not to—"

Mary said, "Oh, ma, of course not. Being late's not our fault—"

"Well, ten-thirty means ten-thirty to me, and if your men friends—after promising—can't get you home by then, they simply needn't ask you out. You children must learn responsibility—"

"But, Mrs. Heim, if you'd only listen, we could explain. It's not our fault we're late. It's the storm's—"

"It's an awful storm, ma. You don't know! We left the theater early so we'd get back, but we got stopped by the police—"

Ida began tightly, "If you were speeding, young man—"

"Oh, ma—no! There were trees down on the road."

"That's right, Mrs. Heim," the boy said. "One had fallen across a car, and traffic on the State Road was tied up both ways. All we could do was wait. We couldn't even turn around and go another way."

It occurred to Clint that being out tonight was actually dangerous—Ida should be thankful to have Mary home safe. But she was saying skeptically, "Indeed!"

"I tried to telephone. I called— Who was it, Mary?"

"The Larry Ochsens."

"They—well—they didn't want to come over with our message."

"Larry had a cold," Mary said sarcastically.

"So we had to sit there while the tree was chopped out."

Ida said, "If it was as bad as that, you should have left the movie sooner."

"But gee, ma! we didn't know it was blowing so. We were inside! Be reasonable!"

"You must learn to allow for accidents and delays. When I fix an hour for my daughter to be home, I want her home, storm or no storm."

Adrian said: "Now, Ida! God Himself couldn't keep a date tonight. Now I know Mary and she's telling the truth. The boy seems a decent sort—"

"Adrian! I'll handle this. And don't blaspheme again."

The young man said: "Don't quarrel over me, Mr. Heim; it's not worth it. What we've told you is the truth, but since I'm not welcome—"

Mary cried, "Oh, please—"

"I'm sorry, Mary. I like you fine and had a swell time. But your mother doesn't believe me, and I don't like that! Or her! I'm sorry—"

He was angry too, but kept himself in hand and went out without even letting the door slam. Clint wanted to go after him, explain Ida, and try to patch things up, but knew it was useless. That boy was gone for good.

Mary herself was weeping. Clint had expected hysterical anger, but the girl simply stood there, crying blindly, not hiding her tears. Her feeling was loss, not humiliation, and if so what Ida had done in driving the boy away was a pity. He would have been good for Mary.

What was wrong with the woman? What was wrong with everyone here at Weyland Meadows?

Clint shook his head with the hopelessness of finding out.

There was no saying. You saw them in the present, as they were, in one dimension only. What they had been, what they hoped to be, the why of what they were was hidden.

The pounding hammered through the slashing of wind and rain to become part of Ed Thomas's sleeping mind, so that he dreamt and

woke. Someone was thumping on the door downstairs, and the tingling shock of rousing to the unexpected blended into a sense of something wrong.

What time was it?

The night was still black, the storm still raging. Wet fingers played on the window while the house groaned beneath its lashing.

But it seemed a blacker night than it should have been.

Thomas groped for the bedside lamp, found it, pulled the chain. That was it: the lights were out—street lights and everything.

The machinery, Ed thought. The iceboxes!

He flung back the blankets and stumbled up.

Cold air brought Swan's voice up the stairwell: "It's Kenny Ihloff, Ed."

And Kenny called, "Hey—the lights are out!"

"How long?" Ed asked. "How're the boxes?"

"Warmish. I do' know how long. I just come to work."

"You called Larry?"

"Larry? Naw! What's a use?"

Ed, hollow with worry, rasped, "He's your boss, isn't he?"

"Yeah. . . . You want I should go for him?"

The lack of enthusiasm found an echo in Ed's mind. He said, "I suppose the phones are out too? . . . Well, we'll have to go find one, then. Yes, go wake him, Kenny; tell him to dress and I'll pick him up in the car. You get back to the creamery, rig some lanterns or truck headlights or something so you can see to load."

The emergency focused a problem he had sparred with tentatively before: Diesel power. Out here in the country, loss of electricity was one of the few things that could stop a plant dead. It had happened before, in Wycoff's time, and ever since that Thomas had played with the idea of Diesels; but inertia and lack of money had prevented action.

So now he was in trouble. He hated emergencies and had no faith in his ability to handle them. Dressing, plodding head down toward the sheds where his car was, he wished he had let Larry sleep: if he was to make a fool of himself, he preferred to do it alone. Outside Ochs's, however, he honked and waited.

In the light from the dash, Larry's unshaven, thin face with its soft red lips looked sluggish and sleepy. "Where we going?"

"To find a phone to tell the power company our lights are out."

"They know it. I was up when they went. I a'ready called 'em."

Thomas was surprised. "Good. When?"



"Little after twelve."

"Twelve! But that's two hours ago, and the lights are still out."

"Well, they said there was trees down all over the place. Maybe they'd fix us up by noon tomorrow."

"Noon! Why, by then— You didn't take that for an answer! By then the ice cream 'll be melted and the milk soured—"

"N-no," Larry said. "I argued some, but I couldn't do nothin'. So I hung up and went to bed." He opened the window to spit, and Ed hoped the moisture against his face was only wind-blown rain.

He hid his furious disgust, uncertain still what he himself could do.

The storm had played hob with the barns also, for the power failure had meant that the midnight milking must be done by hand. Charlie Dann, trying to round up every boy he could, sent Mickey Pratt after Dick Flemhos, who was off, and Boo Fusek, who was late. And Pratt stumbled squarely into trouble.

Mickey was no tale-bearer, but after a night of unhappy hesitation, he decided this was something Charlie ought to know for the good of the barns and the dairy, so he hailed him as Dann was leaving for home after the morning milking.

The storm had passed, and the day was beautifully clear and mild with a suggestion of heat and humidity to come as the sun, rising clear, set the sodden earth steaming. Unfortunately, Charlie was in a bad humor after a mere two hours' sleep and consequent indigestion. He growled, "What you want?"

Pratt said: "I got sunthin' t' tell you. I do' know just how to say it, but— You 'member I went over to those greenhouses last night to get Boo and Dick for you? Well, I—I found they had a couple of floozies there."

Charlie said nothing.

"One was paradin' around with no clothes on, doin' what she called a bubble dance. They were all pretty lit on beer."

Charlie halted in the drive, his fox face pointed and sullen. "Well, what of it? Their business, ain't it? Ain't I got trouble enough 'thout trying to keep you boys pure? Hell, I'd have a beautiful time trying to do that!"

"Yeah, but would the farm like having its houses used for—for that? Boo's bringing his tramps in there could give the whole place a bad name and hurt business. Ed wouldn't like it."

Charlie shrugged. "If he lets 'em live there, what can he expect?"

It's his headache. Sure, it's a lousy way to live. But who'll be hurt but themselves? How could it harm the dairy anyway? And what do you care about the goddam place? Take it from me: mind your own business, same as I do."

Mickey stared at the suddenly crimson face opposite, hardly believing this quick anger. He didn't care a thing about the dairy but only wanted to help Charlie. He had figured that if anyone else discovered what he had it might somehow reflect to Charlie's discredit, and had wanted to warn him; but, instead of being grateful, Charlie was treating him like some cheap tattler. Feeling hurt and ashamed, he turned away in silence, sorry he had spoken.

Afterward he reminded himself that Charlie had had a hard night and wasn't himself.

## IV

ED THOMAS looked into the bottling room and caught sight of Larry Ochs. "So there you are! I was looking at the plant figures. Isn't our surplus running low?"

Larry said plaintively: "It ain't my fault. We ain't been gettin' what we used to from the barn and the p'ducers."

"Naturally." Ed resisted the impulse to explain in detail as to a child. "Production always drops at this season. And sales are up: nearly a thousand quarts over the summer. That's a lot. How big a surplus have we, exactly?"

Hemming and hawing, Larry guessed it varied.

"Anyway, it's too small," Ed said with irritation. "We'll have to find new producers. That's your job, and you'd better get at it."

"We-ell, where'll I find some?"

"Go talk to our present ones; you might get a lead."

"You comin' with me?"

"No." Ed grinned a little. "I'll be busy. . . . Oh, by the way, Amos—"

The bottler looked up from his machine.

"Put up two hundred more quarts of B starting Sunday and twenty-five more Guernsey A. For delivery Monday morning."

Amos Vliet sucked his upper lip. "We got the Guernsey, but our surplus won't run to five cans of B that we can count on."

"Larry'll find us a producer." Disappearing into the ice-cream room, Ed Thomas noted that the bottler knew more about the farm's surplus than his boss did.

Ochs stood uncertainly, his hands twisting his apron, and Amos, watching with an ironic expression, asked, "What's a matter, boy?"

"Uh? . . . Oh!" Larry spat toward the drain. "Hell, this is Friday. Saturday, Sunday is barely two days. Too damn short notice. What's he want all that extra for anyway? We taking on a new dealer or what?" He shuffled off without waiting for an answer, and Amos watched with a smile that might have been malicious.

Ed Thomas went straight to the garage, and Red, seeing him coming, asked wearily, "What's the headache now?"

"What shape are the milk trucks in?"

"Oh, that fleet of junk trucks!" Red Walsh shook a gloomy head. "If it ain't one thing, it's another. Number Five's come in with a sprung axle, and the relief truck's shot: next guy takes it out, it's going to fall apart under."

"Any in the shop? Or likely to be, first of next week?"

"Well, Number Nine needs new rings—she eats oil like a wop—"

"But they'll all run, won't they?"

"Oh, they'll run," Red said in disparagement.

The manager smiled with sly satisfaction. "Recently, Red, we talked about new trucks, remember? And decided just what we wanted. . . . Well—go ahead and order one."

The garage man backed water hastily: "Now wait a minute. These trucks'll run, see? They're not perfect, but I can keep 'em going a couple months—maybe through the winter—"

Ed grinned. "Order it. . . . We're putting on a new route."

"No kidding! Hey—swell! When?"

"Sunday night. But keep it under your hat till then."

"Sunday— But, hell, I can't get no new truck before—"

"I know. The new route gets the relief truck—Number Twelve—and we use the pick-up for relief. So get in touch with What's-his-name at the agency and get that order in."

Lew Barchi, in the main office having his collections checked by young Matlock, whose Saturday afternoon it was to work, returned to the drivers' room, dropped his metal-bound route book on the table, and

gathered up his things preparatory to going home. Hal Roane, the only other driver left, said stiffly, "Wait, will ya?"

"I gotta go," Barchi said. Since the strike fiasco he had been sourly conscious of ostracism by the other route men.

But Hal said abruptly, "Siddown."

After resentful hesitation, the cripple took a seat. Roane was a queer duck, contemptuous, unfriendly, and hard; but when he spoke people found it difficult not to obey. He took his time now, while Barchi's impatience grew. Finally he said: "Owe you an apology. . . . Should have helped with your strike more'n I did."

"Well—hell!" Barchi was startled, puzzled.

Roane mumbled: "Wasn't sore at the farm then. You talked wages. Hell—guy like me—out of a job a year and a half—living in a flophouse! I'd just rented a real apartment—four rooms, heat, running water, no guys sleeping with me, no bugs, decent food. Hell, I was a millionaire—and you talked low wages!"

The clumsy sentences slipped out without disturbing the glacial contempt in the blue eyes.

"As for hours: I'd 've worked eighteen a day and been glad—guy gets sick of doing nothing. Felt good to be tired again. . . . The other things—" He shrugged. "Meant nothing to me, see?"

"You threw in with us."

"Lookin' for trouble. Excitement. Stringing along to see what'd happen, but ready to quit if the ax started to fall. Been out of a job too long to risk the one I'd found. Well, things are different now. I changed my mind."

Barchi said: "I don't get it. What's happened?"

Roane stared him down coldly. "I didn't ask if you took orders from Moscow."

"Hey, now wait! I ain't no goddam Communist—"

"So what, if you were?" The thin lips compressed. "Weyland Meadows has done something to me it'll take blood to settle; and I'll get my own back if it costs me all I got. . . . So you want my help or not?"

Barchi could not figure a man practically on his honeymoon, so bitter against the farm you might think there was nothing else on his mind. He was mistrustful, yet uncomfortably so, for he sensed heat and urgency beneath the man's expressionless chill. He said: "Oh, sure! . . . Only it's a bit late. The strike fell through a month ago."

"We'll start another."

"Ah-h-h! I butted my head against a wall long enough. Know how long it took me to work up that flop? . . . Two years!"

"Went at it wrong," Hal said. "Yelled 'Strikel' before the boys were ready and scared hell out of 'em."

"You're crazy! F'r two years I never mentioned striking—"

"They weren't ready," Hal insisted. "Never would 've been the way you were going at it—hammering, blasting, shouting. Guy resents being told all the time, having things yelled at him. You scatter your shot too, blaming the farm for the works in every sentence: wages, hours, route cutting, everything. Sell it to 'em a bit at a time. Make it seem more sensible—less risky."

"Y' know so much," Barchi sneered, "whyn't you do the job?"

"Haven't the gift of gab. You have—but don't know how to use it. . . . Together, we might go places. Those boys can be organized—and organized so that they trust one another and believe in what they're doing. Once they are, you won't need help from the creamery or anybody."

"Can't be done," Barchi grunted. "I got reason to know."

"The hell it can't. This time we knew everyone was out for himself and 'd cut loose the minute the going got tough. Well, we can change that if we go at it right. Pick a squawk. Just one. Concentrate on it. Think up every last argument for it, only don't do the arguing yourself. Feed 'em out slow, and let the rest do the talking."

"So what? What squawk you going to pick?"

"I'd holler for a salesman. We need one and everybody admits it—even Ed Thomas. All right! Work through Ben Goetz. He hates selling, and the boys know he's not the kind to get them into trouble. Start him talking. Get them all talking, get 'em excited about a salesman, but stay clear of the talk yourself. Sneer at 'em, even. Tell 'em they'll never get anything out of Thomas the way they're going at it. Hell, feeling like they do about you, they'll work plenty to prove you wrong. A couple of 'em 'll go to see Thomas. Ben and Tom North, maybe; the boys 'd trust them. But there'd still be no organization, no committee, nothing formal. Just Ben and Tom talking to the boss. No hint of trouble if he don't come through."

"We-ell—"

"Look where it gets you. If the boys work together once, they'll do it again. If they get something by it, you've proved we can get things by organized action; they'll feel good and want something more. If they don't, they'll resent it; but it won't be you in the doghouse—it'll be

Thomas." Hal Roane shrugged. "Whatever happens, it's only the start. We got squawks enough to last a long time."

Barchi was breathing hard. Here was help—the first intelligent help he had ever had; and the flame of enthusiasm which had faded after his failure flared again. Still he was suspicious. "Damned if I can see what's in this for you?"

Hal answered directly: "I want to see this damned place crippled—crippled good—one way or another. . . . I gotta get my book checked. If you want to wait, we can go out for some beer and talk it over."

Lew Barchi waited, but as mystified as he had been before.

Bending to the hole through which the cases passed into the icebox, Amos Vliet shouted: "What's that? What you say, Manny?"

Manny Zapeto yelled from inside: "How many Guernsey you think you're bottling? You lost count, or what?"

"Uh-uh. Putting up two and a half more from now on. Thomas said to. And there'll be sixteen-seventeen more B later today." To himself he added, "Maybe!" And he called to Larry Ochs across the room: "Hey, boss! You got that extra fi' cans of B for me? Where is it?"

Larry hedged. "Well, look: I thought we could manage without it, see? For a while." His drawl was whiny. "We can, can't we?"

"Go look at what they weighed in from the barn and producers this morning and tell me how. Hell, we'll be sending to the barn for the afternoon milking to finish our regular run!"

Larry shuffled across, his face long and guilty, his voice a sly whisper. "Well, look: in a pinch, couldn't we—well—stretch it some—like Steve used to? Wouldn't hurt nobody."

"Two hundred quarts is a lot of water," Amos said brutally. "And what about tomorrow? and the day after?"

"I'll find a p'ducer pretty soon."

"Well, do you do it on your own authority—or ask Thomas?"

Larry pawed the red-tiled floor.

"Here he comes now. Make up your mind."

Ed Thomas must have been worrying about those five cans himself, Amos thought, for he spoke of them at once, and Larry had to confess a second time, awkwardly. The answer made the manager look sick and disgusted. He asked, "Did you even try to find a producer, Larry?"

"Sure I did! All day Friday. I went, like you said, to the producers we already got, but they didn't know anyone."

"And then?"

"We-ell—what else could I do? I come home."

"You go out yesterday at all?"

"Well—no. . . . I didn't know where to try."

"And what about tonight's two hundred quarts?"

Without the nerve to repeat his earlier suggestion, Larry shuffled, while his big awkward hands twisted his apron. "I do' know."

There was silence. The manager's worry deepened as he found no ready answer. He muttered: "I should have guessed this two days ago and been ready. Now you've got me in a mess!" He beat one hand restlessly into the other. "We can't stand here doing nothing—"

Amos cleared his throat, and Thomas glanced up between annoyance and inquiry.

"Keystone's running a surplus," Amos said.

"Keystone?"

"Enough to supply us with what we need till we find a producer." Amos added, poker-faced: "As a matter of fact, you'll find they're saving five cans for us till noon."

Thomas stared, and a slight frown gathered between his eyes. But Amos let it ride without apology or excuse, and the frown slowly passed. The manager said, "I'll see what can be done."

When he had gone, Larry mumbled, "See here now—you tryin' to make me look bad?" His dark skin was flushed, his soft lips trembled; but in spite of his anger the words were still drawled: "Damn it! You'll make me sore. This is my department, and I'll run it my way. You better understand. Try showing me up again, I'll fire you!"

Amos guffawed. "Larry, you're no Steve! Don't try to act like him."

"But you're makin' me look bad—"

"I'm keeping the creamery running in spite of you. Why not scram out of here? Get a truck, and fetch me that milk from Keystone. How 'bout it, now?"

Larry was apoplectic.

## V

WHAT Tom North lacked in height, he made up in breadth, for he was built like a snubbing post and was almost as tough. He had a blacksmith's arms and depth of chest, heritage of his family's trade, and at thirty-six still had strength in his shoulders and skill in his hands. His

mind was uncomplicated though its natural simplicity had acquired an odd icing of route driver's sophistication.

He ran Route Number Two, but was not working today. Sunday was hardly the best day in the week to be off, but Tom, not much minding, was enjoying the bright, clear fall freshness and admiring his new home. There was deep satisfaction for him in this last, for the acquisition of a house had given him a feeling of permanence such as he had never had in seven years at Weyland Meadows; somehow the transience of apartment dwelling had never let him put down roots or feel secure. It was not accident that he had been the first of half a dozen to speak for Steve's house; he had been on the alert for a vacancy and ready to jump at it. There were so many advantages: the nominal rent; the closeness to his work; above all the fact that it brought Nancy, who was five, to the country, which Tom, who had been raised in the country himself, believed a necessity for growing kids—even girls. In a sense, the house was a milestone.

Of course it needed fixing up; its gray paint had weathered to nondescript duskininess and the four boys in the Ochs family had left scratched woodwork, scuffed floors, and holes in the plaster. Still, that was to be expected; so were certain defects in Allie Ochs's housekeeping which Clare kept discovering: when you were as fat as Allie, you skimped on work that had to be done on your knees. Tom knew the farm should have attended to the place before letting them move in; but that had been impossible—Adrian was busy painting the barns, a job he had to finish before the weather got cold—so Tom had not pressed the point, and only kept a list of things that had to be done, which he meant to see that Heim started on soon—within a couple of weeks.

From the porch, Clare said: "Dinner's nearly ready, Tom. Better go for Nancy. She's at Groce's." She was a plain woman, but Tom with native humility credited her with intelligence and better judgment than his own; and her capacity for passion was an unending surprise to him. Her one real lack, he found, was a sense of humor.

At a leisurely pace he drifted down the dirt road past Ihloff's, past Heim's, past Goetz's and Marc Vaccarelli's to Carly Groce's, on whose lawn Nancy was playing with Carly's daughter Virginia. Ginny was two years older than Nan, but the children were becoming fast friends.

Catching sight of him, Nancy ran up with a rag doll—mangled, dirty, atrocious, but obviously wonderful to her. "Oh, daddy, daddy, lookit, lookit! It's Ginny's, and I want one 'xac'ly like it."

Nancy, with her soft blond ringlets and blue eyes, her chubby, perky



face that could be oddly self-possessed, took after neither Tom nor Clare, for she was beautiful. Her parents regarded her with a certain awe and reminded each other that beautiful children often lost their looks in growing, but they were immensely proud.

"We have to go home," Tom said. "Dinner's ready." He spoke to Ginny, who was shyly silent, stood briefly in talk with Carly who came out to say hello, then responded to Nancy's tugging by taking her hand and starting down the road.

"You like Ginny?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. On'y I wish she lived closer."

"This isn't far for a big girl to walk."

"Unh-uh. On'y I have to pass Vaccarelli's."

Tom frowned. "What's wrong with that?"

"There's some boys there, and they tease me. They tease Ginny too, if she comes to our house. We don't like 'em."

"Boys think they got a heaven-sent right to tease little girls because they're bigger and stronger," Tom explained. "Don't mind them. They don't know any better."

"Are they honest bigger and stronger?"

"Well, yes—but girls are nicer."

Satisfied, Nancy skipped beside him in silence.

"Except for the Vaccarellis, d'you like it here in the country?"

"Uh-huh. On'y I wish there was someone to play with 'sides Ginny."

"Why? I thought you liked her."

"I do. On'y we'd have more fun if there were more of us."

A cloud shadowed Tom's mind. She was right: half the pleasure of the country was sharing the fun. And there were no other girls Nan's age.

"I don't like cows either," she added as afterthought.

While he washed up in the kitchen, Tom repeated to Clare what Nancy had said about the Vaccarellis.

She nodded. "The child's complained about those boys before, Tom, and I've heard them myself. Their teasing's crude, and it ought to be stopped. It's too soon for Nancy to learn filth."

Tom shrugged vaguely, frowning. "Kids that age—they think it's smart. What can you do? Probably their folks have already—"

"Rubbish," Clare said. "Their folks talk that way themselves; they don't know any better. Well, you'll have to speak to Marc about it. I won't have Nan hearing such talk. Speak to Swan Ellis and Ed Thomas if necessary."

Nancy, who had been washing in the upper bathroom, came downstairs clattering and jumping, and they moved to the table, where Clare said grace.

"While you're complaining," she added, "there's our stove. I know dinner's scorched, but it's not my fault. It works like a charm for a while; and then suddenly nothing'll cook, or else everything burns. Something's wrong with it!"

"Maybe it's the gas. It's not city gas—"

"It's the stove. I want Mr. Walsh to look at it. And another thing: he ought to look at the furnace."

"Why?"

"It's a mess. Go down and see before it gets so cold we have to use it, Tom. It's old, rusty, falling apart—"

"O.K. What else? . . . I'm making a list of everything that's wrong so Mr. Thomas can have it all fixed at once."

"Take the furnace first. We'll need it this winter!"

He stopped carving to glance at her, caught by the tone. "You been listening to the women! Well, don't. They gossip like—"

"It isn't gossip. It's complaint, and if half what they say is true—"

"It isn't!"

Her lips set primly. "You make that list and take it to Mr. Thomas, and we'll see for ourselves. They say he won't do anything for anybody—"

Tom said, "I know him better than those crazy women do, and I trust him. Why muck around with 'em, anyway? Make friends with someone like Mrs. Goetz, and keep your skirts clean."

"I'll choose my own friends. Besides, if they happen to be right, I want to know—for your sake—before it's too late."

"What do you mean by that?"

But Nancy said, "Isn't anyone going to talk to me?" and Clare turned to the child, leaving him unsatisfied and uneasy, the sense of permanence which he had felt oddly shaken. It had not occurred to him that his future was not tied irrevocably to the farm's; the idea that Clare might be thinking otherwise was disconcerting.

That same afternoon, Clint Matlock was in the Heim kitchen helping Ida wash up after Sunday dinner. It was a task he disliked; but the indifference of Adrian and the girls forced it upon him, for he was ashamed to sit idly by as they did while she worked. In the face of their thoughtlessness, he needed reassurance on human nature in general even if he had to provide it himself. He had, however, acquired Adrian's knack

of pursuing his own thoughts while she talked, so that it was with some wonder as to how the subject came up that he heard her ask if he was a university graduate. When he admitted it, she demanded:

"Then what are you doing here? Why don't you get out while you have a chance, and make the most of your knowledge and education?"

No answer was needed, but it seemed a shame not to use the prestige his education apparently gave him. So he said: "I think I am making the most of it. I chose this place carefully and after consultation with the Chamber of Commerce and leaders of local business. I believe this is a coming dairy; that those in on the ground floor have a chance to go places."

"Oh, nonsense!" Ida said.

"Even if it amounts to nothing of itself, it could prove an excellent steppingstone to a good job with a bigger company. It did for Mr. Wycoff. They say it may for Ed Thomas too—and soon. A small, promising company like this is an ideal place to start a career; a man can expect recognition so much sooner."

Ida said stiffly: "Good work gets no recognition here. When there's a vacancy, someone from outside will fill it. Look at when Wycoff came: did Charlie Dann or Swan Ellis have a chance, even though they'd been here years? Or when he left? No! Thomas, who'd barely got acquainted, took over."

Clint began mildly, "But when Steve Ochs left last month—"

Ida was scornful. "Do you honestly think that's to the point?"

Clint had no answer. He took a stack of plates to the shelves, and Ida talked on.

"You take my word, there are many here who've deserved rewards and never gotten them. This dairy's a thankless dead end. With your brains and education you ought to see that, and get out while you can. You don't appreciate your advantages, Mr. Matlock. An education's only a bother to young people today. It comes too easily—"

"I appreciate it, all right," Clint growled, ungracious because her arguments paralleled his own rising doubts.

"Then act like it! You may have had good reason to come here; but if you made a mistake you ought to admit it. Oh, you hate conceding you were wrong—you youngsters always do. You know everything—until it's too late. I know what I'm talking about: I threw away my own education."

"So you're a college woman? I'm not surprised."

But he was surprised. He had known that the Goetzes were university

people, and Thomas; that Petitt had been to business school. But few others at the farm had given him reason to think they had graduated from high school. That Ida had been to college startled and amused him, and seemed to account for her considering herself superior.

"Well, I didn't finish. I went two and a half years, and then—well—threw it away. I was giddy and unthinking and—young!" Ida twisted the word distastefully. "I hated studies, and maybe I wasn't very good at them; but I could have graduated." She sighed. "Well, I was warned; I thought mother was a tyrant and wouldn't listen. You won't, either. But I'm as right as she was."

"Who were your people? I don't think I ever heard?"

"Our name was Symmes."

"Any relation to old Doc Symmes who—"

"He was my father, but—"

"Why, he saw me into the world!" Clint was genuinely astonished. "Why, I remember him! He died when I was small, but he took care of all my family at one time or another."

"Hope they were some of the few that paid their bills."

Clint grinned sourly. "We may have been. I think we used to dun your father for the bill; not vice versa."

"I imagine. He had no money sense. Worked all his life; never anything to show for it."

"He was a good doctor, though."

"Possibly—but no one with any money ever trusted him. Never once did he do anything to make a name for himself or attract people whose patronage would have made us all comfortable. Mother drove him all she could, but it was hopeless. He wouldn't do a thing for himself."

"No. The man I remember wouldn't have: growling old gent with the gentlest hands in the world; rasping, angry sort of sympathy that kids saw right through. Generous—ready to help anyone. The grand old country-doctor type, transplanted to the city."

Ida was bitter. "Have you any idea what it's like living with such a person—depending on him? Generous, humph! He gave away everything—pills, time, actual money when he had it—and to people who didn't matter; but he wouldn't stir a finger for mother or me!"

"Really? I always thought him a grand old coot. Perhaps you feel this way because you missed half your education? The money gave out before you finished—was that it?"

It was no good, he decided at once—it took more than veiled sarcasm to hurt Ida. And he wanted to hurt her, for, though Doc Symmes might

not have made a fortune, he had succeeded in starting an ungrateful daughter through college, which not every man could do.

Ida grudgingly gave the devil credit: "Well, no. It wasn't his fault. There was money to finish; mother had seen to that."

"Then—" He stopped, shrinking suddenly from the whole subject.

But Ida went on: "It was the kind of person he was: he wouldn't even take care of himself: he wore the same sloppy suit years and never had it pressed. And the battered old hat he wore with it, his worn collars, his string tie— Why, you were ashamed to be seen on the street with him. He used it as an excuse for not meeting decent people, I think—that and being too tired; he was always too tired if mother wanted him to go anywhere. The real reason was, he'd no appreciation of nice people or nice things. It wasn't as though he didn't have the chance. Mother wanted and tried to help, and had lots of good connections—she was quite prominent, mother was. Probably you remember her too? She belonged to all kinds of organizations and charities—held office in them—and knew all the best people. But father wouldn't be helped. He just wouldn't! He could have had as fine a practice as any doctor in town, but he had to take care of his grubby Greeks and Poles. Oh, the life mother led with that man!"

Clint had nothing to say, but Ida was silent only a moment. "Mother was a great woman, Mr. Matlock, even if I didn't realize it. She did what she could for me, saw to my education, introduced me to her friends. You wouldn't believe some of the boys I knew in those days. They're important men in town now. I was popular. If I'd taken mother's advice, I'd have had money and an important husband and a happy life—"

It was incongruous, coming from a woman no longer so very particular about her own appearance, from the drab, faded, acidulous wife of a mediocre carpenter. Was it a dream fantasy she had summoned so often that she believed it? Perhaps. And perhaps not.

"Instead," Ida added bitterly, "I gave it up—education, decencies, prospects, everything—to marry Adrian!"

Clint glanced at the door, fearing the words had carried to the living room.

"I left school to marry him. We eloped, fools that we were, because mother wouldn't hear of our marrying. She knew what Adrian was—oh, my, yes! I can still remember the things she said about him. But I wouldn't believe her. I thought I was being persecuted, and it was romantic to fly in the face of parental wrath." She spat the words. "Even if

it's terrible to say so, I don't know now what I saw in the man. Whatever it was, it didn't last. Mary came so soon, and then there was only drudgery. Mother always said he'd never amount to anything, and she was right—oh, so right!" Ida glared at him. "Young people don't realize! They're crazy headstrong, like I was. They know everything. Get out of here, Mr. Matlock, and get out before it's too late."

The effect of the warning was not what she intended. It was obvious now that she was taking out the accumulated bitterness of years on the dairy and its people, and Clint was inclined to discount sharply everything she said. Proportionately, his original faith in the place commenced to revive.

Monday morning, the 23rd of September, Ed Thomas came to the office looking apprehensive. With a quick glance around, he dumped the mail on the bookkeeper's desk, stepped to the inner office, and looked inside. He appeared to be relieved to find it empty.

"Is—" He dragged the word, dropped it, started over again more casually. "Don't suppose Isaac's been here?"

"Ledmuller? No." For a second Wharton Pettitt looked puzzled; then the muscles of jaw and temple ridged convulsively, accentuating the queer block shape of his head, and he blurted, "You've gone ahead with Dunty's proposition!"

"Well—yes. . . . Of course it may take Isaac awhile to find out what's happened; but when he does he'll probably want to talk things over. Uh—send him in when he comes."

"A pleasure," the bookkeeper said grimly, but to a retreating back.

Clint Matlock was puzzled. "I don't get it. If it's any of my business—"

"It'll be everybody's," Whart snapped. "Remember Ledmuller's account on the books—for five hundred dollars? Well, we've just stolen his retail route to satisfy it."

"Stolen it!"

"Certainly. The driver must have left Isaac's milk on the dock last night and delivered ours on the route. And Isaac wasn't even told."

"But theft?" Clint said. "We've a right to hire a driver from another company; and if he can bring some of his customers with him— Haven't you said the driver's control of his customers was an illusion anyway?"

"It is. But you gamble on their inertia every time you buy a route or take on a dealer. And Ledmuller's milk is so bad most of the customers 'll be thankful for the change. Oh, of course you can justify it! Customers have a right to choose; so has a driver. Ledmuller owes us a bill which

we've tried to collect for five years, and which we'll righteously cancel now in payment for the route. But it's theft just the same, and Ed knows it. Look at the way he went at it."

Lines deepened on Clint's forehead. "It is pretty sudden—"

"Be an excuse if it were. No! I was with him last summer when the idea hit him, and I warned him on the spot. It's no question of snap judgment or impulse—only immature thought and the belief he can get away with it."

"But I don't see— If a driver can change jobs, and if customers can change dairies, where does the theft come in?"

"Routes and customers are different," the bookkeeper said tartly. "A route is a collection of customers and can be bought and sold or listed as an asset in a financial statement. A person can own a route but not a customer. A driver can run a route, but it isn't his to take to another company. A route is tangible property, and its symbol is the route book. If Ed didn't have the sense to make Dunty leave his at Isaac's, there's no question about our grand larceny; and even if he did, what's happened comes too close to it for me. I don't like it."

"Oh, it was bound to come. Ed's mania is new business, and expansion is his god. Up to now we've bought routes and acquired dealers who were free agents; but we've been edging toward this. Growth, to him, isn't the dribblets of business drivers bring in; it's raking in ready-made routes. In the metropolitan area, we've picked up dealers easily enough; but locally, where Ed 'd like to buy up every milkman smaller than Keystone, we haven't been getting anywhere. I've watched him get impatient. . . . Well, the combination of Isaac's bill and Dunty's willingness was too much, and we're in trouble. Because Ledmuller won't take this lying down." He broke off as slow footsteps began to ascend the stairs.

Isaac's tall form was stooped, and there was a suggestion of weary age in his measured movements; his hawk face was gray, and only the twitching of his long-fingered hands betrayed emotion.

"Where's Thomas?" His accent was more pronounced than usual, but his words were deliberate. "Where's the thief stole my route?"

"Ed's inside." Pettitt pointed. "Go right in. You're expected."

"I imegin so! Only I didn't think it of you, Pettitt. Honest, I didn't. To leave a man bottle his milk to be left on a dock to go sour—uh-uh. To steal a man's driver under his nose, I didn't think you would."

"Save it. Too bad if you said it all before you got inside."

"I got plenty more. Special stuff fer Thomas. More than he likes, mebbe. I just wanted you should know I didn't think of you, you were such a rascal, Pettitt. I didn't—honest. . . . And you, feller"—to Clint—"you help these crooks steal an old man's living? I wouldn't know you from Roosevelt, but you look nice. You think they done right?"

Clint followed Pettitt's lead. "You better talk to Ed."

"Go right on in," the bookkeeper added.

"You got orders not to say nothing! Sure. I ain't surprised."

As the door closed, Pettitt said, "Trouble in capital letters."

Clint shrugged. "He was a lot milder than I thought he'd be. I feel rather sorry for the old man."

"Uh? Don't waste your sympathy! Remember his bill. He won't pay it or even return the cows; because of it he has us in a forked stick, and makes the most of it: forces us to subsidize him to protect our investment; pay A prices for what isn't B milk and, into the bargain, keep his place decent enough ourselves to pass inspection. But that doesn't justify Ed's stealing the route and getting the dairy into a mess."

"Perhaps he's figured a way of handling him?"

Pettitt snorted. "He's in there now, trying to convince him that—facing a *fait accompli*—he'd better take cancellation of his bill as price of the route. Plus a cash settlement, perhaps. And Isaac won't. You see if that isn't the proposition and the answer!" Clint had rarely seen the man so worked up. "Thomas! When I think of the ballyhoo he's had around town—a coming young businessman, going far. Ah-h-h! . . . He's going till he meets a really tough problem—and no farther. Well, this may be it. His results have looked good, but he's where he is now only by blind luck and blundering bullheadedness."

Clint made a wry face, wondering how much to discount Pettitt's blustering anger, but conscious that there might be justice in the charges.

"You think that's strong because you don't know him," the bookkeeper went on. "I see him in there—in his office—behind closed doors, and I'm the one he talks things over with. He is hesitant, unsure, unable to make up his mind. There isn't a department head on the place who couldn't handle a crisis more efficiently. He has no more right to be running this business—He's too inexperienced, too young!"

"I've noticed he's slow making up his mind; but once he has, he seems definite, sure of himself—"

"Oh, once he's made a decision, he sticks to it. God, how he sticks to it! But can he decide anything on the spur of the moment? Pah! Spring something on him, demand an answer, and you'll get sheer nonsense.



Try it! He has to consider hours before every decision, and then he's as likely to be wrong as right. I advise till I'm black in the face—but he won't listen. He's afraid to listen for fear he won't seem like a real manager. He doesn't trust himself, Matlock, but he won't trust anyone else either. He resents our knowing more about the farm details than he does. Agh! He's a small man in spite of what they say. Jealous of authority. He has no more idea of how to handle men—I tell you, if a management wants respect and authority, it has to be tough and just. And what's Ed? Lax and prejudice-ridden. . . . That strike last month: he should have fired Barchi. That man's a Communist, and the sooner we get rid of him the better. But oh, no!" He burlesqued Ed's voice: "He's our best milkman. Well—you see if we don't hear from Lew Barchi again!"

Clint frowned. "There's more wrong with the drivers than Barchi, Whart. They've some justified complaints—"

But Thomas's door opened, and Ledmuller emerged. He seemed less old, less stooped, and there was a twinkle of evil satisfaction in his gray eyes. Ed Thomas fumbled at his heels.

"—no point discussing it while you're sore," the manager was saying. "In a day or two, you'll see it differently. Come back then—when you've cooled off—and we'll see if we can't reach a fair settlement. I'll meet you halfway."

Ledmuller paused on the landing. "I said what I come to say, and for nothing would I soil my shoes on this place again. What it means to steal, I'll show you quick, 'cause nobody, not even you, could do it to me free fer nothing. You'll see, boy. You can't steal from Isaac." He closed the door carefully, and his slow feet went down the stairs.

Thomas wore a rueful expression, and one hand rubbed the back of his neck. After a moment he sighed. "Whart, get me Pete Thornburg on the phone. The lawyer." He sighed again and condescended to look faintly worried. "Isaac thinks he's suing us for twenty-five thousand dollars." He laughed.

Pettit didn't laugh. His eyes met Clint's with meaning.

Hack Dunty came in late Tuesday to report his customers well satisfied with their new milk; he had lost only one quart of A and ten of B.

"It's like I said," he told Thomas. "They only stuck to Ledmuller 'cause of me, and they're glad I changed. Some'll increase their orders—see if they don't. And Isaac won't run an eleven-quart route long; when he quits, I'll get back those I lost."

Thomas, who would have been satisfied to hold half the route, felt a

return of the feline satisfaction which he had had from the start of the project.

"Bill Bevis'll ride with you awhile learning the route. He's relief man. We'll have to prune it, Hack. Wherever the bulk of it lies 'll be your territory, but what's outside 'll go to other drivers—"

"Huh? . . . But you can't do that—"

"Of course for every quart we take, you get one in exchange—"

"But those customers are mine! They're loyal to me."

"You've joined a big dairy, mister. You can't chase around delivering customers on other drivers' routes. We'll let you keep all we can, and you'll lose no business by it. In fact, as I was about to say, since we don't run routes as small as two hundred points, we'll make you a present of thirty-four quarts from some other driver's route. There's one whose territory 'll be near yours who's running better than three hundred points. Lopping a few off him in the right place 'll make him a much better route, incidentally. It's like pruning."

"But he'll kick, won't he?"

Thomas grunted. "Why? He'll be guaranteed his pre-cut earnings for six months, long enough to fill his route again if he works at it. It'll give you about two hundred and fifty points. A good route's three hundred or more, and you ought to reach that easily in six or eight months."

"But I never done any selling! I never figured—"

"You'll have to now. All our drivers do." He listened to Dunty's wild protesting, a quiet smile hidden behind his eyes.

The new route made the milk shortage acute. During the first half of the week, Ed Thomas was jittery lest an angry Ledmuller stop sending milk as a producer. But the man was not one to cut his own throat: his deliveries continued, and on Wednesday increased as he sent the five or six cans which had previously gone to his retail route. This removed immediate pressure, and Ed canceled the purchases from Keystone; but with sales increasing daily it was clear that the farm must find more milk, and quickly. On Thursday, he and Larry Ochs went hunting, and succeeded in bagging a single producer big enough to satisfy Weyland Meadows' needs for months to come—an achievement which raised his spirits in marked degree.

There were headaches, too, such as the assignment of the new stand-drive which arrived Friday morning, the blue paint of its lettering barely dry on the sides. It might have been given to Dunty over the protests of the other drivers, or it might have gone to Jake Larsen, who

needed it most; but Ed hated to trust it to either. He wanted to give it to Ben Goetz, who was easy on trucks; but that would have made Jake sore, and probably Barchi and Myhychyk too, both of whom drove older trucks. In the end, he saved it temporarily for relief, hoping the question might settle itself later more easily.

And there was the headache of reorganizing the routes. Five of the seven were eventually affected, and Ed spent most of two afternoons with Bill Bevis working it out. Bill knew his routes and his milkmen and was under no illusions: trade three one-quart deliveries for one three-quart one, and you were in for a kick; trade a ground-floor quart for a quart on the fourth story, and it meant a howl; exchange a customer who paid on the dot for one who postponed, or one who paid weekly for one who must be collected cash, and you were in for a roar. And God help you if you took a personal friend from a man. They sweated over it for hours, changing the boundaries of Hack Dunty's territory a street this way, a street the other, trying to find exchanges that were both balanced and sensible. Ed thought the result satisfactory, but Bevis shook his head.

On Saturday, the drivers involved were asked to wait. Marty Myhychyk, surprised and a little uneasy, was told to step into the manager's office, and Bevis got down to cases in the drivers' room with the rest, who groused about it sporadically and unhappily.

Barchi said to Hack: "Because we growl about having our routes changed, don't take it personally, fella. It ain't your fault; it's the farm's. You'll get it too. Working here, you expect to have your route messed up every so often. You get to know a couple customers, like 'em, get so's you can talk 'em into extras—and then the farm gives 'em to some other guy. You gotta expect it."

He had been sniping at Hack all week without much response, and Jake Larsen, listening with half an ear, decided he was slipping: he had no punch any more. Here he was chatting casually to the new man where once he would have pounded the table and shouted in his face.

"How many customers you bring to the farm, Dunty?" he was asking mildly. "Couple hundred? Well, you're losing the first of 'em today, and that's only a start. Know how many of your original bunch 'll be left next summer? You wouldn't believe me! Me, I brought three hundred when I came. I'm delivering fourteen of those today! The rest are on other routes. You know why? They don't trust us. If we can swing our two hundred quarts one way, they figure we can swing it another; so they take it and scatter it. It's tough. You have many friends in that bunch?"

Dunty didn't answer.

"Makes you feel funny, not being trusted. Hey, Jakey boy?"

Jake said unexpectedly: "Yeah, it does. It's a lousy feeling."

Hal Roane looked up quickly to meet Barchi's eyes.

Jake went on: "I never thought about it before, but that's why I get so sore over their not giving me that new truck: they don't trust me with it—and goddam it, they ought to! I'm a good driver."

"The hell you are," Hal said.

Jake flared, but Hal was already back at work.

Barchi said to Dunty: "You see how it is—and what the hell can you do? Nothing. I bet you thought you were making a smart move, coming here? Well—maybe, but it ain't heaven. What you get paid at Ledmuller's?"

"Eight per cent."

"So eleven and four looked pretty good, huh? You have to collect and canvass for him as well as deliver?"

"Collect. I never done much selling."

"Tough. Y' have to here. Worst of it is, you work up a decent route and, just when you got it set, the farm cuts you, and you gotta start all over again. Now, if we had a special salesman, cutting wouldn't hurt so much—but the boys can't see it."

Jake said, "Oh, hell, we can see it all right, but—"

"—but won't do anything. Yeah, I know. Take me. My route was cut last June: they took a hundred-odd points from me, and I got a six-month guarantee—till December 3rd. You know how many points I got back so far? Twenty. Another two months, and my salary'll be taking a nose-dive. And why? 'Cause of my own fault?" He laughed. "Uh-uh. I just worked too hard."

Dunty said foxily, "Maybe the scheme's not to work? Then you'd never build a route big enough to cut."

Barchi shrugged. "Under three hundred points, what kind of living d'you earn? You got a wife and kids? Well, maybe you feel like a millionaire now, getting thirty-five a week; but I'd want more'n that to take care of my family if I had one—"

At this point Chief Myhychuk came out of the main office looking as though he had been hit. His lower lip was tucked up childishly, and the dazed laxness of hands, arms, and shoulders hinted shock.

Lew Barchi took one look. "Say, what gives? They fire you?"

"Fire me?" The Chief's blank eyes focused slowly. "Naw. But the sons of bitches 're cuttin' my route . . . God—damn—them—to hell!" As he began to swear, the words rolled stiffly from immobile lips.

Barchi grinned heartlessly. "No kidding! How much?"

"They're giving forty points of mine to this guy." He made a wide-armed gesture at Dunty and took to profanity again.

Roane was scornful. "Forty points!"

And Barchi: "That's nothing. I was cut a hundred and forty."

This held no comfort for the Chief. Barchi thought: Jesus, he's sorer than I was when it happened to me! And that reminded him. "Hey! Didn't you say last June how they'd never dare cut you? How about that now?"

Marty Myhychuk's fist doubled and swung unexpectedly, and Barchi had barely enough time to duck. The blow caught his shoulder, and his half-balanced chair crashed back to the floor.

Bill Bevis, springing up, shouldered Marty into a corner; but the driver was no longer swinging—only cursing his fallen tormentor, calling him everything he had forgotten to call the farm.

Barchi got up, working his shoulder gingerly, surprise frozen on his face. "Jesus!" he said. And again, "Jesus!"

Myhychuk was yelling at him. Barchi thought: Why's he so crazy sore over forty lousy points? Then he realized it was not the points, it was the fact of being cut. It was Marty's first, and perhaps he had actually believed the farm dared not touch him. Why else would he get angry at being reminded of what he had said?

Hal Roane was watching with cool interest. Bevis, shouldering the Chief so that he couldn't punch again, was giggling on a high-pitched note while Jake, white and staring, seemed impressed by a fury only half understood.

"Let him go, Bill," Barchi said. "Why get sore at me, you damn Polack? I didn't cut you. I was the one who tried to stop the farm's cutting routes—remember? What support did I get?"

"What do you mean?" Myhychuk yelled. "I was with you!"

"Like hell! You said, 'You betcha, chief!' nine hundred and ninety-nine times, but were the first to fold in the pinch!"

Myhychuk told him what kind of lie that was, but Barchi jeered.

"You don't believe me? All right, I'll prove it. You want to get up another strike?"

With Hal's eyes on him, Lew Barchi denied temptation. "Nuts! I'm through with strikes. You guys don't want to strike."

"Sure we do, goddam it! I wanted to all along."

"Well, the rest didn't—and don't. So I say, To hell with it! I held the bag once, but not again! Now shut up and listen. You're hot over a

piddling cut. Me, I've had two healthy ones and yelled till I was blue in the face—getting nowheres. Now I got a mind to let you do the howling awhile. Only I still think the system's unfair, and if you got any ideas about changing it I'm ready to listen. Only strikes are out."

"But, hell, Lew—goddam it—"

"You're all words, and no brains. You're sore now, but by morning you'll cool off and won't think of it again—"

"The hell I won't! The farm can't cut me. I mean it. They can't!"

"When you find a way to stop 'em, let me know."

"I'll go on strike alone—"

Barchi roared: "Shut up about strikes! There ain't going to be any! That's flat." And as Myhychyk stared: "Maybe there's other ways not so risky. If you're still serious when you cooled off—say in a week or two—let me know, and we'll get together."

"Well, when?"

"A week from today—if you're still interested. You won't be!"

Myhychyk said emphatically that he would.

Barchi looked at Hal, and their eyes met in a mental handshake.

## VI

FALL came prematurely, it seemed to Clint Matlock. Other years, the leaves had not fallen till November; this year, September vanished in clear, bright sunshine; the new month came in hazy with mist and rain, and there were nights of frost combined with mild days, making the first week of October a blaze of color.

At Weyland Meadows, the drivers had settled to their new routes with minor mixups and complaints. If Barchi and Myhychyk met to discuss grievances, no one knew of it, and there were no apparent results. The creamery, its milk shortage solved, slipped into routine and let Larry Ochs give orders in blissful ignorance that they were usually an hour or two too late. The boys cheerfully got the milk out in the way that Steve had taught them, and Amos Vliet gave what orders were necessary.

Larry had a letter from Steve describing his new job in glowing terms, and the farm heard of it enviously. Steve said he had never worked harder, but had never had so much authority, so many men under him, or less supervision. He was trusted, he got on with his men, had made some fine "contacts"—a big-business word which sounded impressive. He

devoted two pages to the house Eastern Dairies had given him: its size, conveniences, newness and state of repair, which made poor reading at the farm. He added casually that Eastern Dairies would be invading Weyland Meadows territory after the first of the year, and hoped his old company would make a fight of it—a hint which stirred the farm to uneasy restlessness.

In the office, the first-of-the-month routine was broken only by the service of the Ledmuller papers, which Ed Thomas accepted offhand, referred to the lawyer, Thornburg, and apparently forgot. Then the periodic trouble with the producers cropped up again, and Thomas and Charlie Dann enjoyed another long session of cleaning them up. On top of this a particularly bad count on the B milk, from the city laboratory, encouraged Clint Matlock to grasp an opportunity when the bookkeeper was absent to bring up the subject of a laboratory of their own. He told Thomas:

"We pay the city forty or fifty dollars a month and get a report long after the milk's been delivered. The same amount might not run a lab of our own, but at least it wouldn't be money thrown away."

The manager was complacent. "We'll have one some day. There's provision for it in the new creamery."

"Some day is not soon enough. I'd like to see us start at once testing each type of milk each day as it comes through the bottling machine, and approving or rejecting it for delivery while it's still in our icebox."

"Rejecting it!"

Clint was firm. "Rejecting it, for poor count or for uneven butterfat content. We advertise a high-quality, standardized product, don't we?" Noticing the manager's expression, he hurried on. "I'd also like to see our producers' deliveries tested daily, the bad ones spotted—"

"All of them are bad," Thomas growled. "I don't want to know about them; it'd be only one more headache."

"Look, Ed. Suppose you hire a person to be a trouble-shooter as well as a lab man, turn the headache of the producers over to him, lock, stock, and barrel, with authority to get them clean and keep them that way. Oh, there are plenty of jobs he can do. The icebox inventory, for one."

Clint had been struggling with the icebox since September 1st; but its weird mixture of shortages and overages had improved little since Steve Ochs's departure; nor, oddly, was it any easier to get information about it downstairs. He went on:

"There's no reason why that box shouldn't balance; but it doesn't and won't until someone spends a week or two down there, counting

the inventories, bottling, and deliveries. And neither Whart nor I have the time."

The manager objected: "You're not going to find a bacteriologist willing to clean up barns and count inventories in addition to testing. He'd say it wasn't his line. Oh, we'll have a lab some day. We need one, I know, and all these problems, too, are going to have to be tackled and solved in due course. I want our milk clean, uniform, and of high quality, just as you do; but we can't do everything at once. New men on the pay roll cost money—and we've the expense of the new creamery coming up, the expense of a general wage increase the first of the year. I'm afraid—"

"For a trouble-shooter," Clint said, "you wouldn't necessarily need either an experienced or an expensive bacteriologist. I've some one in mind—quick, smart, very much interested—who could take courses at the state agricultural college this winter if it would lead to anything. I haven't actually discussed this with her, but—"

"I'd want a man. How could a woman make the producers and creamery boys stand around?"

"This one could. I'm thinking of Mrs. Goetz—"

"Oh! I thought some of your arguments sounded familiar." Thomas hesitated. "Personally I like Sonia Goetz very much, but— Understand, I believe in putting out a quality product, but I can't afford to be hipped on quality as she is. Our emphasis must be on sales at present and for some time to come—"

"But neglect of quality only courts trouble and wastes time—"

"All right, all right! I'll think it over."

Clint decided he had gone a little too far. He was conscious of the manager's disfavor; but at least he had listened.

On the 10th of October, the owner showed up, not to scold about Ledmuller's suit as Wharton Pettit had dourly guessed. Instead, Melius shrugged this off as Thomas's affair, amused and even tacitly approving—provided the dairy did not in the end lose by it. He had come, instead, with details on the new creamery. Specifications had gone out, and bids would be opened at month's end, so that there was little to do now but wait. Still, Thomas, Pettit, and he spent the whole afternoon discussing it like boys. The bookkeeper contributed the only real news: that the farm might be able to bear a bigger proportion of the cost than had been anticipated. The milk business was booming, September had seen some farm crops charged in; the profit for the third quarter promised to be unexpectedly high.



The following Monday began the semiannual health inspection of those employees who handled milk. The creamery boys were the first to go to Dr. Mat Caron's office, and they were followed Tuesday afternoon by some of the barn hands. The job was finished before Wednesday night. On Friday morning early, the manager had Caron's report.

Clint and the bookkeeper were in the outer office when the doctor telephoned, and both looked up at Thomas's exasperated "Oh, dear!"—inevitable herald of trouble. "Who?" There was a gap. "Arnold who? I don't get the last name"—on a note of hopeful relief—"but we haven't anybody named Arnold on the place."

"Oh, yes we have!" Petitt said *sotto voce*.

"Well, spell it then," Thomas said. "What? . . . Oh, you must mean Fusek—Boo Fusek." His voice fell away in disappointment. "Oh!"

"What's wrong now?" Petitt asked as the manager hung up.

"Uh? . . . Oh—more trouble, as usual."

"So I judged. But what?"

"Oh—Mat got a positive Wassermann from Boo. That's all."

Thomas's nervous fingers beat a tattoo on the desk top, and Petitt, meeting Clint's swift frown, sighed wearily.

Ed Thomas would have called himself open-minded, but as a bachelor of thirty-six was perhaps not as liberal as he believed. At all events, Boo Fusek's arrival in the office produced in him a reaction that was actual physical shrinking.

Boo looked as always—a happy-go-lucky grinning little fellow with sallow skin, a broad, low-browed face topped by soft hair the color of weathered wood; but the ugly images in Ed's mind were not improved by sight of the heavy calluses and dirty, broken nails on the awkward hands or by the odor of the barns, which seemed more pungently noticeable than usual. He looked away, not caring to see the boy so clearly.

Boo acted as though he hoped for a raise. "Y' all sent for me?"

Ed mumbled, in a hurried, hushed tone: "Yes. About your health exam. You're in trouble, Boo. I'm sorry."

"Yeah?" The smile dimmed. "What's wrong?"

"Don't you know? Felt badly, haven't you? Been having trouble?"

"Naw," Boo said. "What's wrong?"

Ed told him, but so awkwardly that he had to explain a second time. He added: "See Caron right away. He'll—look you over to make sure, give you treatments—"

"I don't want to," Boo muttered. "Ah feel all right."

"Well, you aren't. You have to be treated. Cured. You can't go around spreading disease, you know."

"Aw, hell!"

"And of course only perfectly healthy people can handle milk—"

Boo's forehead wrinkled. "Y' mean Ah'm through here? Right now?"

"You'll get two weeks' salary in place of notice."

Boo considered, then shrugged. "Well, I been thinkin' of movin' on anyway. Ah'm tired takin' care of cows."

"By the way—where've you been living?"

"Yonder at the greenhouses."

Unfortunately, this was no news to Ed. "Been having girls there?"

"Uh-huh. Couple. Maybe they give me this that I got, huh?" There was a gap. "Well—guess I'll be going." Boo seemed to feel that the amenities demanded a touch of sentiment: "This—this ain't been such a bad place to work. I—I thank y' all fer hirin' me." And he backed toward the door.

"You'll see Dr. Caron, Boo?"

"Aw, shucks! Ah cain't afford to, now I got no job."

"Go and see him, damn it! He'll send you to a clinic or some place where you can get treated free. You can't go around sick."

"Aw, Ah feel all right." But in the end he agreed to see the doctor, though so casually that Ed doubted if he would.

As soon as he had gone, the manager summoned Wharton Pettitt. "You know where that boy's been living, Whart?"

The bookkeeper hemmed. "Well, yes, I—uh— They've been at the greenhouses, haven't they—he and his friend, Flemhos?"

"Of course. I knew it; you knew it: neither of us did anything! Wasn't it you I asked to remind me—sometime last summer?"

"It was not! I thought they were there with permission."

"They were squatting! Otherwise, they'd have been paying rent."

Pettitt said, "There's no need to get hot about it."

"But they've been having girls over there. Tramps!"

"Of course they have—boys of that type."

"You knew how they were living—and didn't tell me? You should—"

"I supposed you'd given them the house," Pettitt snapped, "and credited you with knowing how they'd act in it. I didn't think you cared—any more than I did. Why should we? What difference does it make?"

"Difference? Suppose it gets in the papers that a syphilitic has been handling Weyland Meadows milk. Good Lord! That would be bad enough, wouldn't it? But when you think of all the other things—even

worse—which might have happened with those two entertaining their—their cheap chippies there—I don't want things of that sort to be associated with the farm—”

“Oh, nonsense! Our regular health inspection turns up trouble—as it's supposed to. We fire the man—as we're supposed to. What can anyone criticize about that? What more could we do?”

“Someone may ask why we've been letting our men live like that, risking the health of all our customers—”

Pettitt made a wry face. “Well, you knew they were there: why didn't you do something about it yourself? No need to get excited. Haven't we more important worries than how the barn boys live? I say it's Charlie Dann's job to keep track of them.”

“Of course!” Ed said. “Of course it is! I'll have a talk with him.” And he went out, leaving the bookkeeper staring.

Looking for a scapegoat, Pettitt thought and snorted. He himself was not sorry this had happened, for it got rid of one of the two farm boys he disliked most. Too bad, he thought, that Dick had not been fired too.

Her doll face strained with seriousness, Roxy Dann insisted: “I dunno what's a matter, Mickey—honest, I don't! He's all worked up. Excited, swearing. Gee, I never seen him like he is tonight. But he keeps saying, ‘I wish Mickey'd come over. I wish Mickey were here!’ So I come over to see if you'd—”

“Sure. I'll come. I ain't doing nothin'. Wait a sec.”

“I'll go back ahead,” Mrs. Dann whispered. “He don't know I'm here. You come knock on the back door like it was all your own idea.”

Changing into clean coveralls, Mickey Pratt hoped there was something he could do; he had always liked Charlie, feeling sorry for him, perhaps. Charlie was lonely. He crossed to the Dannels' back stoop, where Roxy greeted him overloudly for her husband's benefit:

“Well, gee! Look who's here. . . . Say, Charlie, guess what! Mickey's here. . . . C'mon in! We been talkin' about ya.”

Charlie Dann was standing in front of a small fire in the grate, his hands together on the mantel. His mumbled “Hiya, Mick” did not sound very pleased.

“I stopped by to say hello. Y'busy or anything?”

“Na-ah.” Charlie kicked at the fire, stirring it to flame.

When a question or two brought only sullen, one-word answers, Mickey decided that either Roxy had been wrong about her husband's

mood or he had slipped from excitement to depression in a hurry. He was at a loss and made a move to leave, but this woke Charlie up.

"Don't go, Mick. Stick around. Hell, I feel lousy!"

"From the way you acted, I didn't think you wanted me."

"Sure I do! You're the only friend I got. You're the only one stops in to talk or say hello any more."

Mickey stirred uneasily, dreading Charlie's mawkish moods.

"Fifteen years here, and no one thinks I'm important enough to be decent to." He looked over his shoulder and added inconsistently: "They're jealous of me. . . . You're my only friend, Mickey. You're the only one I can turn to. That's what I've come to after fifteen years: my only friend's a barn hand, a hired boy—"

Cracks like that had lost Charlie his friends, but Mick was not touchy. "You need help, Charlie? What's wrong?"

"Ha! . . . In fifteen years—not since Melius first hired me—have I been bawled out like I was today. They respected me here once. Swan Ellis and I were top men. They trusted my judgment and ability, and I ran my barns unquestioned. Now a whippersnapper who wasn't born when I milked my first cow tells me how to do it."

"Who—Ed Thomas? What's he want now?"

"He wants me to wet-nurse the boys, hold their hands, play Sunday-school teacher to 'em, sleep with 'em so nobody else can—"

Mickey frowned, sensing what was coming.

Charlie said, "They fired Boo."

"What for?"

"For living at the greenhouses, I guess."

"Dick, too? I noticed they didn't come to work this after—"

"Just Boo. But look, Mickey, you—I—you told me about their living over there—remember? Only I didn't see it was my business. Ed never told me I had to keep track of the boys. Why should I, anyway? Cows are my job—" He blurted suddenly, "You won't tell, will ya—that I knew where they were?"

"Why? . . . Did you say you didn't?"

"Ed was so damned sore! . . . You won't tell, huh, Mickey?"

"Hell, no! What d'ya think I am?"

"Thanks," Charlie said.

"Only I don't get it. I see he wouldn't want guys camping out in farm buildings and having floozies with 'em. But, if he fired Boo, why not Dick? And why all of a sudden?"

"You know what I think? . . . He was lookin' fer an excuse to get

rid of me! He was so sore: if I'd said I knew about those two, I'd been fired right then. He said I must know where they were, or how could I get in touch with them if I had to? And he said, 'If I ever catch you in a lie, Charlie, I'll know how to deal with it; and I'll know how to deal with it if I find any of the boys living like that again, too!' "

"Oh, nuts! He didn't mean—"

"He did! He wants an excuse, that's all. He thinks I'm too old. He wants a younger man in my place. Donny Ochs has been after him—that's what I've said all along. Those Ochses! Look at Larry. . . . I tell you, if they can they'll fire me and put Donny in my place."

"Oh, hell! Why should they?"

Charlie said fiercely: "Ed hates me. I was almost manager once, and he knows I might be yet. That's why! He's afraid I'm getting too strong—"

"Aw, you're crazy."

"You won't tell him about my lie, Mickey? Honest to God?"

"No, of course not. Only Jesus, Charlie, calm down!"

But the last trace of Dann's depression had vanished. He was talking with nervous volubility, and Mickey knew he would hear an interminable lot of troubles before he could break away and go home.

"This yours?" Boo was holding a pair of shorts toward Dick Flemhos—shorts limply yellow with wear and sweat. He was getting ready to leave, humming a little tune as he always did when, restless, he quit a job. Being fired seemed to make no difference in the pattern.

"You can have 'em," Dick said.

But Boo tossed them aside, and somehow that hurt. Dick didn't blame him for not wanting them; still they were a gift. A lurid emotion, red and smoldering, lay beneath the blackness of his mind like the lights of a city beneath a cloudy night sky. "Where you going, Boo?"

"Ah do' know. South, maybe—with winter comin' on. Nice down there: warm, sunny. Or maybe West. Always wanted to see mountains."

Flemhos sat gloomily on their sagging bed. If his friend didn't suggest coming along, Dick decided, he must leave this house anyway, not knowing he was to be put out. Winter was almost here, the place already damply raw and uncomfortable, but the loneliness was what he feared; without Boo it would be no fun.

"Boo—you want to leave? Honest?"

"Oh, sure! Ah'm tard of cows."

Of course Boo was always restless, and they had been at Weyland

Meadows quite a while. Still Dick, feeling hollow, could not believe this.

"Where's all my junk? Didn't Ah have 'nother shirt once?" Boo clattered downstairs and returned with their kitchen and table ware. "Look: how 'bout my takin' this? If you go back to the boarding house, you won't need it. . . . Hey, it's funny how little stuff I got. There oughta be lots more."

But there was no concealment. The scarred, smirched walls were bare; the only furniture was the bed and table, and the scattering of junk on the floor could have hidden little. Under the yellow glare of the naked bulb, Flemhos saw the scrapings of the barns dragged in on their boots, the mouse tracks, the odds and ends of garbage left from some time when they had unaccountably eaten here.

Dick asked, "You going to a doctor, Boo? Maybe you ought to."

"Ah feel a' right! What I hear, it takes long while to git over the syph. Ed Thomas says I can git it done free, but— Shucks! I ain't stayin' in one place long enough."

Dick's tortuous mind worked slowly to its inevitable conclusion: "Who told Thomas you were sick, anyhow?"

"The doctor who give us our health exams. Who'd you think?"

"Maybe Charlie. He's been after us. He could of pulled a fast one to get you fired. Maybe he did, too—'f you feel so good!"

"Why'd he want to do that?"

"Well, he's been after me, hasn't he? Been trying to get me ever since I came here, given me every nasty job, kept me working overtime more'n anybody, bawled me out about everything—"

"Aw, nuts!" Boo said. "It ain't you that's fired, is it?"

His lack of understanding hurt Dick, whose bitterness against Charlie Dann washed over him in a sudden crimson tide, his body shaking with the violence of it.

Boo did not notice, having gone in search of more of his things; there should have been much more than the meager stack of possessions he had so far collected. What had his salary checks gone for anyway?

"Boo—you goina let me go with you?"

His friend said: "Why? You got a good job. Sixty a month and board."

Dick's small mouth contorted over broken teeth, and his dark face drained to olive. "But I don't like it here! Everybody's against me— Why not change jobs together, and go on like always?"

"Aw—" Boo grinned, not meeting the pleading eyes. "How'd we live? You got any cash? . . . No—I thought not. Anything coming?"

"Couple dollars."

"Me, I got two weeks' pay. But, hell, that won't get me far—"

"Maybe you don't want me—huh?"

Boo grinned. "Sure—but, hell, it'll be easier— We ain't been getting on so good—you know what I mean?—the girls and all—"

Dick's lips tightened. "You got sick from those women! 'F you'd let 'em alone, you'd be all right now, wouldn't be leaving—"

"Well, I gotta have my fun, see? That's how I am. You been acting like—like you owned me or something!"

"So you don't want me?"

"Look, you stay here awhile. I'll send for you, maybe, when I find a job somewhere."

Blackness closed in on Dick. So the farm, having failed to break him any other way, had taken Boo! And not only in a physical sense. Boo didn't like him any more. Boo was saying they hadn't been getting on so good, and it was over . . .

Was saying now, "You'll be late for your midnight milkin', guy!"

As though Dick cared!

He got up slowly, stumbled out of the room, down the stairs, into the darkness outside. If Boo didn't want him around, he'd go. . . .

## VII

VIC STEWART, who worked with Red Walsh and Happy Jacobs in the garage, was an average boy, moderately tall, moderately broad, moderately good-looking, moderately good at the routine garage tasks. He was a quiet sort who had never given the farm food for talk and was thus virtually unknown. He lived at the boarding house and was very properly asleep when events abruptly interfered with his humdrum life. What aroused him, he never knew exactly—a yell, perhaps, or some other sound, or the glow that cast the shadow pattern of the window pinkly on the far wall; but suddenly he was awake—wide awake and scared.

A glance at the clock showed it was two-thirty-five, but instead of blackness outside, there was a wavering, pulsating light. His first impression was that dawn had come; but then he remembered that his windows looked west. He sat up sharply, his heart hammering.

Through the glass he could see a red halo circling the gable at the far end of the creamery, the west end where the one-story shed of the boiler room was tacked to the main building. The boiler room . . . the *furnace* room . . .

It was fire!

In confirmation, someone began banging the great iron hoop suspended behind the garage as an alarm, and the frantic, rapid *clang-clang-clang* spurred him to leap for his clothes. Excitement drowned any sense of catastrophe, though he did wonder fleetingly what the dairy would do about tonight's delivery and tomorrow's bottling.

The alarm was wakening the farm. Tying his shoes, Vic saw lights spring up at the Ellises'; here in the boarding house there were sleepy questions, sudden excited shouts. With his head start, he was down-stairs before most had begun to dress.

Still buttoning his shirt, he ran across the lawns and the drive, around the creamery to the loading platform on the north side, where the white body of a stand-drive was pinkly visible backed to the dock. Hal Roane's Number Six, though neither Hal nor Kenny Ihloff was visible.

Whoever was pounding on the hoop stopped.

Smoke, rolling to the northeast in low, thick billows, swirled down, stung his nostrils. The fire was not in the boiler shed as he had thought but in the west end of the storeroom on the second floor. It had burst through the roof at the peak by the rear wall and was eating down toward the center of the building. It might not be too serious, provided the fire department hurried.

And he wondered suddenly if it had been called.

Starting forward on impulse, he nearly collided with Ihloff, who barged out of the darkness breathless, gasping: "Hey, I rung it! Ya hear me? Ya hear me, Hal?"

Vic demanded, "Did you call the fire department?"

"Huh? Who are you? Where's Hal?"

"Vic Stewart. I asked, Did you call the fire department?"

"Naw—Hal Roane was doin' that. I was ringin' the alarm. Ya hear me? I did it good, huh?" Excitement made the stolid Ihloff voluble. "Always wanted to ring it, ever since I come here. I wanted to bang that thing hard, and now I did!"

"You sure Hal called the firemen?"

"I do' know. He started to—from the office."

"There's no light up there," Vic said.



"The lights are off. That's how we first knew somethin' was wrong. We was loading—see?—when all of a sudden the platform went dark. I said, 'What the hell?' and he says, 'A fuse went.' So I jumped off the dock and started around back to put in a new one, and I looked up, and there it was. I says to Hal, 'Hell, Hal, it's a fire!' and he—"

Vic's restlessness got the better of him, and he started for the office. On the cement stoop he hesitated, reluctant to step into a burning building even though the fire was all at the far end; but presently, sniffing for smoke, he moved cautiously up the stairs. Not till he reached the top did he find any.

The fumes stinging his nostrils, he stood irresolute in the darkness, short of the landing. He called, "Hal! Hal Roane!" But there was no answer, only the noise of the fire which was plain now, a crackling roar like static in his ears.

The office door was closed and locked.

After a moment he went into the drivers' room and tried the telephone there; but it was disconnected as it was supposed to be at night. The smoke was thinner here, but got acridly into his eyes and smarted.

An unnamed impulse took him next to the storeroom door, which he opened, heat and smoke striking him in the face. The sound of the fire became a roar and its glow was dull red through a heavy murk.

In a strangled voice he called, "Hal!" but got no answer still.

Coughing badly, he turned and smashed the ground glass of the office door with his heel and an instant later was at Clint Matlock's desk dialing "Operator" by touch.

Someone, he found, had already called; the fire trucks were on the way.

It seemed like minutes that he had been upstairs, but perhaps it was seconds only, for surprisingly few of the farm folk had had time to assemble when he reached the stoop again. He was drawing fresh air into his grateful lungs when Ihloff appeared at his elbow, asking: "Where's Hal? Ain't he up there?"

"I guess not. The office door was locked. Somebody had reported the fire though, so probably he chased back down and called from another phone."

"He knew the door was locked," Kenny said. "I hollered to wait for my passkey, but he said to hell with it, he'd break in."

Vic, frowning, glanced at the dark well of the stairway over his shoulder. A spark, eddying down, settled on his ear and he brushed it off with a muffled exclamation. "Maybe we should go look for him," he

said. "Maybe the damn fool figured he could put the fire out and went into that storeroom."

"Ah-h-h!" Kenny muttered.

But after a moment Vic opened the screen and started upstairs again. Near the top, where he began to get smoke, he dug out a handkerchief to put over his nose and mouth and, crouching there on the treads, told himself that Hal could not have been so crazy as to go in, that he himself was crazy to; nevertheless, he climbed to the landing, turned to the storeroom, and entered.

The door slammed behind him on its spring and he found himself in blinding, gagging smoke so thick that the glow of the fire beyond barely reddened the blackness.

Coughing, eyes streaming, he got down on his knees.

Jesus God, he thought, let's get out of here quick; 'f that poor bastard's here, it's no use pulling him out! No one'd last long in this stuff. . . .

Kenny Ihloff, on the stoop, kept saying, "Hey, you guys—look—wait!" as people came around the corner and raced past him to join the growing circle about the burning building. No one paid any attention, and as time dragged by with no further sign of Vic, a frightened, desperate note crept into his pleading.

Finally, as the first of the fire engines roared up the drive, he got Clint Matlock's attention. "Hey, Clint! . . . Clint! . . . Tell 'em there's a guy up there." His gesture included both firemen and stairs. "Stewart. He got a crazy idea Roane was in the storeroom. Shouldn't those guys go after him pretty soon?"

But Vic had rescued himself and Hal too. Clint's party, hastily got together, found him struggling to get his limp burden past the spring-held storeroom door. The clothes of both were smoldering.

"Get him," Vic said. "I'm all right." As stronger hands reached for Hal he straightened, staggering, stumbled to the top of the stairs and was just saved from pitching to the bottom by two husky firemen.

Hal was carried down hurriedly but carefully and laid on hastily fetched blankets on the lawn. One fireman, kneeling over him and arranging head, arms, and legs for artificial respiration, said: "I got this under control. Somebody better see to that other man. He got a dose of smoke too, and a cut hand."

Vic stood against the stoop, retching from the reaction of the cold pure air. He asked dazedly, "What hand?"

But the fireman was calling: "Hey, you with the first-aid kit! Hop across here. . . . Got a tourniquet in there?"

"What hand? What's the matter with it?" Vic repeated stupidly.

"Your right: it's all slashed up. What you do? Put it through a window?" He grabbed the arm above the elbow and applied pressure.

"Window? . . . I— Yeah. I hadda have air, Clint— Where's Clint? Look: I'm sorry I broke it—see? But I couldn't get it open, and I just hadda have air. I thought I'd pass out. That smoke—"

"Forget it. Naturally!" Clint turned to the fireman. "I'll get the pick-up and find someone to take these two to the hospital."

Vic asked, "How's Hal?"

"Not so good," Clint said. "I don't know—"

"Send him to the hospital, 'stead of me. I don't want to go." But, dizzy and sick again, Vic passed out cold before Clint could get the pick-up from the garage.

Two hose trucks were busy at the reservoir behind the creamery, and a chemical wagon was pumping a thin stream onto the roof; ladders were at the storeroom windows which had been broken, water was being shot inside. Steam was mingling with the smoke against the stars.

On the fringes of action, people were still coming up in all stages of undress and excitement. Everyone had turned out, men, women, and children, and the crowd was swelled by people from the surrounding country who had seen the glow or trailed the engines from the city.

Clint Matlock, filtering among them, kept asking anxiously: "You seen Ed Thomas? . . . Ed around? . . . Ed been by here?"

Finally Swan Ellis told him what he had begun to suspect: "Ed went to New York after supper, won't be back till morning." And, as Clint stood with sinking heart, he added gloomily, "'S got a nasty surprise waiting for him."

Clint mumbled, "Somebody has to get the plant running—"

Firelight tinted the broad planes of Swan's face red, making them more impassively Indian than ever. Clint said: "You're always in charge when Ed's not here."

"Larry's job."

"But you're boss when Ed's away. Everybody knows that—"

The farm man said stiffly: "I can't give orders in other departments: wouldn't work. They'd have to come to me. Otherwise it's up to the office."

"You mean me?" Clint frowned. "But I haven't been here six months! I know less about the business than anyone!"

"You can do it."

Clint was suddenly sore. Swan had a point, but it was too fine a one for an emergency. Well, all right, he would give his first order then and there. He said:

"You know where Thomas is, Swan? O.K. Get in touch with him. Fast!"

He turned on his heel, liking Swan's surprise, but forgetting it at once as his mind leapt ahead. He went looking for Red Walsh and found him watching the firemen with professional appraisal.

"Got it under control?"

Walsh said: "Yeah. Minute they put a hose in. 'Tain't much."

"Thomas is in New York, so it's up to you, Red, to get power back in there. In a hurry."

Pessimism descended on the man. "Well, I do' know. I'll do what I can, boy; but it might be a job, and I got no help. They taken Vic to a hospital, and Happy Jacobs lives in town. I don't know what I can do. If it's a short in the walls, it might take all night to find."

Clint said: "Call Happy. Call the power people too. They'll send a repair man. Use your own judgment, but don't forget the milk and ice cream in the boxes."

"Well, I'll see. I do' know." Walsh sounded despondent, but started into the dark purposefully enough.

Larry Ochs was horsing with some of the farm boys, and Clint waited while he chased Oz Tatum almost to the barn, caught him, pummeled him gleefully, and strolled back in triumph. His voice was reedy with high spirits and excitement:

"Hiya, Clint! Whatcha doin' out this time a night? Some fire, hey?"

Clint explained that they must get the plant running, but was interrupted by Oz's clipping Larry behind the knees, and had to call them out of the resultant tussle sharply.

"But what can we do till the fire's out and the lights ain't?" Larry squawked. "Nothin'! Hell, y' can't load 'thout light."

"String a cord from the barns—"

"Aw, Red'll have things fixed in half an hour!"

"I doubt it. Even so, loading 'll be an hour behind schedule. And don't forget: everything out of the box tonight has to be checked thoroughly. There's the bottling-room equipment too to be looked over for smoke damage—"

"O.K."—with martyr-weariness. "Get him to string us a wire—"

"String it yourself! He's busy with other things."

"It ain't my job. Whaddo I know about lighting?"

"O.K., if that's how you feel." Clint walked off.

The odor of charred wood and scorched paper was pungent and unpleasant at the top of the stairs, and smoke lingered thinly in the office. Everything Clint touched had an oily feel as he groped to his desk and the telephone.

Getting through to Amos Vliet, he explained briefly and asked for help. Amos had but one question:

"What about Larry?"

"You're under orders from the office."

Then he sat in the dark, wondering if he had got himself into trouble.

Red Walsh arrived, stringing a wire from the garage. The fire, he said, was virtually out; Happy was coming; so was some guy from the power company; they might have a temporary hookup by breakfast. He screwed a bulb into the socket of the extension, turned it on and whistled. "Guess you rate a new paint job!"

A thin, smoky deposit had stained the brown floor and the reddish woodwork of the office almost black, the yellow walls a dingy, even drab. It was oilily palpable on the desk, the telephone book, the ledgers; and when Clint moved a piece of paper he had left on the blotter, the clean rectangle beneath was startling by contrast. It made him feel sick.

Red hauled in his extension, snubbed it around a desk leg to keep it taut and high across the drive, and departed for the storeroom with his light, Clint following.

Through the still smoky atmosphere, they saw scorched cement, broken windows, and across the floor, knee-deep, the jumbled, smoldering remains of ice-cream and cheese cartons, jiffy bags, wax buckets for bulk ice cream, butter wrappers, office supplies. Firemen were still pawing in the soaked and blackened shambles for sparks, and faint steam rose around them.

The arrival of light was welcomed. Clint and Red clambered across the debris to the rear wall where the power lines came up, and were joined there by a fireman in authority. Red hung up his light, kicked the floor clear of trash, and inspected the metal cables.

"Any over there?" The fireman indicated the southwest corner.

"Uh-uh. Power and light both come up from the switchboard here. . . . Why? That where the fire started?"

"Probably."

"It wasn't the wiring then." Red sounded relieved.

"Fuse went," the other objected.

"The heat could 've ruined the insulation in the cables. Let's see." He cut one in two places, dragging out the wire between. It was cooked: not burned but dried out, crisp.

"Yeh," the fireman said.

Red cut the cable back piecemeal till he got beyond the damaged part, then prepared to splice new wire across the gap. Soon Happy Jacobs arrived, and then the man from the light company. Satisfied, Clint picked his way out and downstairs again.

Amos Vliet had arrived, bringing two of the creamery gang, and they had strung a cord from the barns without being told. Ihloff, Amos, and Bill Bevis were already at work loading. Two trucks were at the dock, one of them Hal Roane's which gave Clint a fright as he remembered something he had forgotten.

He caught Bevis on the wing: "Whose night off, Bill?"

"The Chief's." Bevis barely paused. "But I called him."

Clint breathed again. So some men, at least, knew their responsibilities and could act without orders.

But how many other things had he forgotten?

Amos, rolling out some cases on a hand truck, said, "All this stuff in the box is O.K. Nothing got at it. The bottling room's messed up, though."

"Bad?"

"Not very. I got the boys cleaning up. And when we get Kenny up to date, I'll go check over caps and things."

"Moses, yes!" Clint said. "Cheese cartons and butter wrappers, too."

And someone should be checking the ice-cream cartons.

He went for Larry, and Larry was sore. "Say! You the one had Amos come out here?"

"Yes"—flatly.

"Now look!" The drawling voice was indignant. "You got no right! I'm boss, and you can't go over my head. I won't have him ignoring me, and the boys taking his orders instead of mine. I won't!"

"He's under orders from the office. You showed no interest in helping me, Larry, so I went to someone who would. If you don't like it, complain to Ed Thomas in the morning."

When he went up to the storeroom to see how things there were progressing, and Red Walsh drew him aside mysteriously. "You oughta know, maybe: that fire chief's awful curious 'bout how this thing started."

Clint frowned. "So? Why?"

"I don't know, but he's been asking questions like Who comes up here? and Is the place unlocked all the time?"

The rest of the night, Clint avoided the man Red had indicated. This was something Ed must be warned about and left to handle. He himself did not care to be asked questions.

Luckily, the damage in the bottling room proved slight. Clint had no idea what he would have done if chemicals and smoke had stained the equipment beyond use. There was an odor, and water had come through in one place, but Manny Zapeto and Frenchy, with steam and disinfectant, could put things right before morning.

Red had the lights on by three-thirty, and the starting of the compressors ended the worst of Clint's worries. Kenny Ihloff was back on schedule by four, and after that it was only a case of checking supplies to be ordered first thing in the morning. The ice-cream cartons were all ruined, as were cheese cups and butter wrappings; but the manufacturers had supplies of all of these in stock, and they could be ordered out at once. Caps, which were a more critical item, had not been seriously damaged.

"Could be worse," Amos Vliet said. "We're pretty lucky, eh? . . . By the way—I been so busy I didn't have time to ask: How'd this start? Wiring? Combustion?"

"Apparently not."

"H'm. What would you think of having Manny spend the rest of the night here, just to make sure the fire—stays out?"

"It might be a darn good idea."

Clint did not bother to ask what Amos was talking about, for they understood each other perfectly.

Ed Thomas reached the farm about five o'clock, which gave him time to get used to the fact of the fire, to the large black hole in the roof, to the smoke stain everywhere, to the mystery of the fire's origin, to the peaceful quiet which had frightened and angered him when he first drove up in the cold dawn expecting to find frantic confusion. Not quite so easily, he got used to the fact that the farm was back on schedule without any help from him.

He had a talk with Clint when the latter came to work, and then dropped downstairs to see Amos. Larry Ochs, he noticed, was not in evidence.

Amos said, "Have Clint order some weigh forms. I forgot 'em in the rush last night."

"So it's you we have to thank for keeping things running, Amos?"

"Me? Nah—I just helped."

"Coming clear out here in the middle of the night was generous. By the way, what was wrong with Larry?"

"Didn't know anything was."

"What was he doing when you got here?"

"Helping Kenny. Figuring how to get light on the platform."

"Had they started cleaning up? loading? anything?"

"They couldn't have, very well. Too many hoses—and firemen."

Ed eyed the other wryly. "You give any orders last night, Amos?"

"Me? Well, I was hustling Manny and Frenchy around some."

"Give any to Larry?"

"Hell, no!"

"Who thought of checking the caps and supplies?"

Amos shrugged.

"Clint said it was you. . . . Larry stay and work with you all night?"

"Search me," Amos said. "What you trying to make me say, anyhow?"

"I'm trying to find out if he fell down on his job."

The bottler snorted. "I was too busy to notice."

Ed sighed. "Well, thanks anyway for taking hold. You'll get a token of the farm's appreciation at Christmas. And by the way: after the first of the year everyone on the place is getting a raise—"

"Swell!"

"If yours should be a bit more than the rest, you wouldn't talk about it, would you?"

"Probably not," Amos said.

Going back to the office, Ed wondered if Vliet were another Steve Ochs—or was merely attempting to copy him. He reminded Ed of Steve a great deal and in many ways.

A fire inspector—an amiable, waddling fat man—spent half the morning poking in the storeroom, but his air when he came back to the office was not portentous.

"What's the verdict?" the manager asked uneasily.

The man found a cigar and rolled it gently between thumb and forefinger. "I'd say—origin unknown."

"So?" This sounded better.

"You can't always tell how they start." The inspector lit his cigar, taking his time. "No question of short circuits, sparks, overheated pipes, anything like that: it started inside, in that southwest corner. If there'd



been heat, heavy humidity, I'd say spontaneous combustion with those waxed-paper cartons and wool jiffy bags—"

"But there wasn't," Ed nodded.

"Nope. And there's no evidence of arson. Somebody might 've touched a match to that paper stuff, of course, but there's no sign of an attempt to spread the fire fast; matter of fact, it didn't spread."

"I see. Then what—how—"

The fat man leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Tell you my guess. You got a john back there, see? Lot of the boys use it? . . . Well, a fella going there could 'a' flipped away a cigarette without putting it out and it fell in that paper junk. Might 've smoldered for hours. . . . You got insurance?"

"Naturally. There's a man on the way down now."

"Well, he might say different, see? Depends on the claim you put in—but me, I'd say origin unknown. Y' got nobody sore at this place, huh? Nobody wants to cause you trouble?"

"Hell, no!" Ed Thomas growled, but not with utter conviction.

In fact, a little later, he sent Clint Matlock to the greenhouses to see if, by any chance, Boo Fusek was still around.

About eleven Adrian Heim came in to report the damage. "We gotta replace the whole back end of the roof—rafters, roofing, shingles, and all. Now, d'you want to reshingle the whole thing while we're at it? And how about the floor? It's not burned through anywhere. We can replace the scorched part at the back, or we can lay a whole new one—"

"We planned for a hardwood floor in there some day, Adrian."

"All right. Then the walls." A dozen other questions. Then a dozen more about the bottling room and the compressor room downstairs, both of which had suffered. And what about the office?

The office, it seemed, would be skimped a bit so that a better job could be done on the plant; this was typical Thomas.

Adrian said, "Then I figure sixteen, seventeen hundred, not counting our time. How's that sound?"

Fairly modest, Ed thought.

Red Walsh's estimate on wiring repairs was modest too. It appeared that the whole job would not run over twenty-five hundred, and Ed was tempted briefly, to do a better job of refinishing the office. But if, by a small sacrifice there, he might be spared questions—

He was uneasy about questions, wanting to know the truth himself, but hating to have all the world know it.

When Clint came back he had Boo Fusek with him, which was re-

assuring. If the boy had been responsible for the fire he would have been miles away. Ed said:

"So you haven't left?"

"Ah'm on my way, on'y I ain't quite gone," Boo grinned. He was too cheerful to be holding a grudge, too at ease to have a guilty conscience. "Y' all had some fire las' night, huh?"

"Yes, we did. . . . Did you see it?"

"You bet! Me 'n' Dick heard the engines and come runnin'."

"Where had you been all evening?"

"Home. Dick was there with me 'fore he went to work at midnight. Then I was alone till he come back after one."

"No—no girls or— You see, Boo, there's some doubt how the fire started. Somebody *might* have set it, and you having been fired yesterday—"

"Aw, shucks!"

"—we were afraid you might hold us a grudge."

"Bu' why? 'Tain't the farm's fault I'm sick. Shucks, I wouldn't set fire to nothin' even 'f I was sore—and I ain't! Hell—"

The manager insisted, "You weren't near the creamery at all last night?"

Boo's face sobered. "Naw! Ah wasn't. Honest to God, Ed."

"O.K." And the solemn assurance was not too hard to believe.

Ed Thomas's mind was at rest. If Boo had not set the fire, no one had, and it hardly needed the insurance adjuster's disinterest in the whole question to confirm the opinion. Officially, the incident was closed.

On the farm, of course, the fire was the one topic of the day, and would have been enough in itself to furnish plenty of excited anecdotes. Added to it was the odd tale that Larry Ochs was staying away from the plant and sulking; then, bursting on an astounded dairy which had failed to appreciate drama in its midst, came the tale of Vic's rescue of Hal Roane, which made the front page of the afternoon papers. And finally—capping all—Boo stopped in the ice-cream room and talked about his interview at the office.

It was quite a day.

This last story reached Mickey Pratt during the afternoon milking, and he repeated it to Charlie Dann in the feed room, feeling he ought to know. He told it as a joke, but the barn man did not laugh.

"They think Boo set the fire?" he mumbled, his eyes shifty.

"Not any more," Mick said. "The way I heard it, they thought he might have, but he talked 'em out of it or something."

Charlie said, with more conviction: "But they think *somebody* set it? They think it was deliberate?"

"Well—yeah. I suppose so—I suppose they must."

Charlie's slack mouth tightened. "They got a bug in their tit and won't get rid of it till they pin this on somebody. I can tell you now who it'll be: me. They been after me long enough; now they got their chance."

"Oh, go jump!" Mick said. "You got the craziest ideas. How could they blame you anyway?"

"They'll say I set it."

"They'd have a hell of a time proving it."

"You don't have to prove lies," Charlie said. "People believe 'em."

"Then why'd they blame Boo for setting it?"

"They're clever," Charlie said, his voice sinking. "Boo's been fired, so he might hold a grudge—see?—and burn the creamery. Well, why was he fired? Because he got in trouble with those girls, living over there the way he did. Well, who'd they blame for letting him live like that? Me! You see what they've done? They've pointed at me through him. Then they washed him out of it. Now what happens next: they'll start whispering about me, lying—"

"Hey, take it easy!" Pratt said. "Gee, Charlie—"

"They'll say I knew where Boo was living, maybe *made* him live there, visited him while the girls were there; and it was all my scheme and I was sore at the farm for breaking it up. Maybe they started stories like that already. What'll I do, Mick? How'll I get out of it?"

Mickey checked himself on the verge of saying, "Aw, you're crazy!" The word was oddly distasteful.

Charlie repeated, "What'll I do, Mick?"

"Oh, get a confession from Boo." It was angry flippancy, but it brought an odd, alert look to Charlie's eyes.

"Yes," he said. "If he did it— Yeah. Yeah, it might work at that."

Vic Stewart was discharged from the hospital after X-rays had shown that an operation on his slashed hand was unnecessary. The doctor had merely immobilized it on a board, as though it were broken.

Before leaving, he visited Hal Roane in a ward and found him swathed in bandages and propped up talking to his wife.

Hal said, "Hi, hero! Siddown. Y' know my wife?"

"Yes, sure. 'Lo, Bet."

Marriage, Vic thought, had done Bet Banevsky no good. She seemed thin-faced and unnaturally drawn, perhaps from lack of make-up, perhaps from weariness or worry, or perhaps—

His eyes flicked downward: she was plump enough, certainly.

But his mind ranged back: October, September. No, not that.

"Guess you seen the papers?" Hal said. "They say your getting me out was quite a stunt. I wouldn't remember, but—" He began again: "I'm not much at talking, can't say what I mean—so if I only say Thanks—"

"Aw, forget it!"

Bet said shyly, "I want to say Thanks too. I—" She choked up.

Vic, embarrassed, kept his eyes on the floor and fidgeted in silence. The pause dragged out. He wanted to get up and go, but had hardly come.

Hal said finally, "How'd ya know I was in there?"

"Why—I don't know—I didn't. Just a hunch, I guess."

"Lucky one for me." And then, stiffly: "I was a damn fool. Thought the fire was small—no sign of it when I brought my truck to the dock, see? So when the lights went, and we saw what was wrong, I thought it'd just started and I'd save time and damage putting it out myself."

Vic mumbled, "I thought maybe that was it."

"I was a damn fool! You get hurt much?"

"Nah. This." He held up the bandaged hand. "It don't hurt any. I oughta say Thanks for getting me a vacation with pay."

Bet smiled. "Hal'll have one too. He's got a bad burn on one leg."

The conversation dried up. Unable to think of anything more to say, Vic rose; but Hal looked at his wife and said, "Wait."

Bet stammered, "We don't quite know how to—to pay you back, Vic, but we'd like you to have dinner with us some night—"

Stewart muttered, "You don't have to do anything for me. But—well—I'd be glad to. It—it sounds swell."

"And we're moving to the farm, Vic. We—we heard about Dick and Boo leaving their house, and I went to Ed today and—and asked him— He said we could have it. He'll fix it up for us, even. He's glad to have a m-married couple in there. Well, when we get it, Vic, we'd like— We want you to come over often. I mean, after your saving Hal—"

"Sure. Be glad to. I'd like it." Vic shuffled, and his eyes fled to the door. "Well, glad you're all right, Hal. . . . Guess I have to be going—"

He was glad to get away. It had been an awkward five minutes.

Charlie Dann's beliefs were not easily altered.

Having convinced himself that Ed Thomas feared his seniority, his experience, his knowledge of dairies, and his old friendship with Jerry Melius, he knew it followed inevitably that Ed would try to get rid of him. Now there was an adequate excuse; they would impute to him immoral and criminal conduct, and he would be finished. To his mind, there was nothing complicated or obscure in the theory; it was so perfectly clear that he never questioned it.

Equally clear, once Mickey Pratt had pointed it out, was the solution.

Boo was still within reach. Charlie had soon made sure of that. The boy had been going; but, what with the summons from the office and the subsequent excitement, he was hanging around for another night. So said Dick Flemhos, sullenly, under pressure.

"Tell him I want to say goodbye," Charlie said. "Tell him to wait for me this evening."

He had decided on nothing, but the necessity for darkness was already in his mind: he had said "evening."

The thought of action stirred a curious, half-frightened excitement. Heretofore, he had protested his treatment without taking counter-measures; now, with his job at stake, he would strike in self-defense, and the mere planning of it bucked up his confidence. Still, both reluctance and anticipation held him back. He ate supper without tasting it and afterward sat by the fire, thinking of what he intended to do, going over it, sweating a little as he pictured it. "When it's eight-thirty I'll go," he told himself. But when it was eight-thirty he decided to wait till nine. Finally the reluctance burned away, and he got up, found a sweater and jacket, and prepared to start.

Roxy wanted to know where he was going. Lest she worry and look for him, he said: "To the boarding house for an hour."

But once outside he went to the sheds to get his car.

He was relieved and sorry to find Boo Fusek's wreck of a machine still standing at the greenhouses, to have someone answer his knock with a shout of "Come in."

Boo and Dick were playing cards across their lone table, and Boo cried: "Hey! Dick said you'd come. Ah didn't believe him."

"I got bad news. Ed Thomas heard you boys were still here, and he's **sore**. You gotta beat it. Boo's leaving, and you, Dick—you'll have to sleep at the boarding house." Dick began to glower, and Charlie shrugged. "It's Ed's fault, so don't blame me. He told me to put you out. You better go, Dick. Mrs. Greenbaum's got a bed waiting."

There were signs of rebellion, but Dick merely muttered, "All right, I'll go—after you do."

"Now!"

The dark face set. "I wanta say goodbye to Boo, see?"

"Watch out, or you'll be going with him!"

Boo said swiftly: "Aw, shucks, Dick! We done said goodbye three times now. Y' all better go, maybe."

Dick's mouth twisted sulkily, and every line of him, as he rose and departed, was a protest and a plea.

Charlie said, "I have to talk to you, Boo, but not here. You follow me in your car and, when I stop, draw off to the side of the road, cut your engine, and come join me."

"A' right. Want I should bring my stuff, or what?"

"You better. You won't be coming back."

Boo's things were collected, and stuffing them in the car was no task. They closed the place and started off, each in his own machine, Charlie leading. They passed Dick where the track joined the County Road, and Boo yelled goodbye at him through the darkness.

Charlie drove to the State Road and turned toward town. Half a mile down, where a dirt road came in from the right, he swung into it, stopping. Boo halted his ancient crate at the side, dimmed the lights, cut the ignition, and left it.

Charlie said: "Climb in. We got a little farther to go."

"'F I leave my car here, it might get stole or stripped—"

"You took the keys, didn't you? Anyway, we won't be long."

"We-ell—if you say so." Boo climbed in.

Charlie released the clutch, and they rolled slowly up the dirt road.

"Where we goin'?"

"To the dump."

"Why? Ain't nobody there this time a night."

"I know," Charlie said. "So we won't be interrupted."

"What we goina do?"

"You'll see."

Faded autumn colors slipped by in the lights: brown bare bushes crowded the road, brown dead grass was rank in the ditches, dying reds and yellows hung crisply from low branches overhead. At the right, a barbed-wire fence clicked steadily by.

After half a mile, Charlie turned left into a narrow, two-rut track that slid downhill between trees. At the bottom, where a swamp had once been, was the farm's refuse dump, well hidden by the depression

and the surrounding woods. He stopped short of it so that the car blocked the road while its lights shone across the center of the open space, hard-packed by the backing and turning of trucks. They made the place look like a stage, black-draped.

Charlie cut the motor and opened the door. "Get out," he said.

They met in the full glare of the lights, and Boo was not grinning.

Charlie said, "Now! Whaddaya know about that fire?"

The other's lips slacked. "Nothin', Charlie."

"That's a lie. You set it."

"Naw, I didn't! Honest to God. Ed thought first I might 've; but I told him No, and he believed me. 'At's a fac', Charlie."

"You can't fool me that easy."

"Ah ain't foolin'! It's a fac'!"

"You can't leave here till I get the truth, Boo."

"Bu' wha' can I say? Ah done told the truth, Charlie—"

The boss's fist licked out. It was years since Charlie Dann had thrown a punch, and it was an awkward, chopping blow; but it caught Boo flush on the mouth and knocked him tumbling. He bounced to one elbow, then wilted sickly as the shock of pain caught up with him. He curled over, one hand holding his numb lips.

Charlie felt the exaltation of physical triumph. He grew and swelled as a sense of power surged through him: wasn't every man could knock down a youngster half his age with one blow. "How about it, now?"

Boo took the shaking hand from his mouth and stared at it. There was blood, and he mumbled dazedly, "You cut my facel!"

"I'll slash it to hell, till I get the truth."

"But, honest to God, boy! I'm telling you! I didn't do it."

"Get up!"

"Y' all won't hit me no more?" He got to his knees, to his feet.

Charlie slapped him, drove him back, slapped him again. When Boo raised his arms to shield his face, Charlie's fist drove at his stomach, sending him to his knees, where he clutched his body, the agonized breath whistling from his lungs.

"How about it, now?" Charlie said. "Ready to talk?"

Boo whispered painfully, "But, Jesus, Charlie—"

"Get up!"

"Ah ain't goin' to. Yuh gonna hit me."

"I can hit you where you are."

The barn man brought his knee up. The boy's head snapped back, and he went ludicrously butt over shoulders. Charlie, laughing aloud

and trembling with excitement, kept him cornered as he scrambled to get away. When Boo finally huddled, arms over head, whimpering, he asked again:

"You ready to give in?"

"But Ah didn't set it!" Boo shrilled. "I cain't confess to what I didn't do!"

"The hell you can't! I don't care if you set it or not—you can say you did."

"No, I can't!"—stubbornly. "I ain't admittin' nothin'—"

Charlie launched a kick. It glanced off Boo's ribs, but a second one caught him squarely across the lower chest and hurt. "How 'bout it?"

Boo could not speak. He was sick, and he was frightened—really frightened, for the first time, for it had occurred to him at last that Charlie meant business. Earlier he had had no thought of resistance; he had taken Charlie's orders too long; now, when he thought of it, he couldn't; the fight was out of him, if there had ever been any.

"How about it?" Another kick threatened.

"Ah—cain't—" He meant "talk," but the booted foot fell before he finished. It fell again and again and again.

Charlie's fury mounted at the lack of response. He was failing, and could not see why: a boy like Fusek had no right to stand up to punishment. He redoubled his efforts; but though the huddled body leapt and shrank at every blow there was almost no other reaction. Charlie felt he was expending his strength against a feather mattress. He had the impression his blows no longer hurt.

He thought: There's a tire tool in the car . . .

Boo did not stir in the few seconds he was gone, and for a moment Charlie hesitated as he crouched above the boy. Then he called sharply, "Boo!" He had to repeat the name twice before the boy raised a cautious head. "See this? Know what it is? Well, I'm going to pound you with it till you talk. Better speak up now."

Boo stared at the tool dully. Then Charlie saw his face twist in sheer terror. The next second, galvanized, he was scrambling up and away.

Off guard because he had thought Boo incapable of stirring, Charlie was a second slow, and the heavy bar merely cut the air behind the boy. The miss threw him off balance and gave Boo a start; and he ran down the path of the lights like a rabbit caught on the road at night, straight across the hard-packed surface of the dump.

Charlie, seeing there was no hope of keeping up, used the last of his



strength to hurl his weapon. It took a low, flat trajectory, revolving end for end like a boomerang; and for a wild incredible, thrilling moment he thought the crazy shot would catch Boo on the back of the neck and fell him for good. It struck the boy's shoulder and sent him into a spinning stumble, but he was up at once. A second later, arms wide, he sailed over the edge of the dump and disappeared. While he crashed off through the woods the violence oozed out of the barn man, and his legs turned watery. The knowledge that he might have killed Boo was not pleasant. He had not wanted to do that, but he had nearly succeeded.

Charlie began to tremble. He was soaked with sweat.

## VIII

ONE afternoon shortly after the fire, Clint Matlock, starting home from the office, found Nancy North standing solemnly at the edge of the grass beyond the loading space, a tiny, sedate figure in a little powder-blue coat trimmed with white fur which had obviously been intended for the city. He asked:

"What are you staring at so hard?"

She turned and considered him calmly. "How do you do? Those men up there are working late, aren't they?"

He glanced up. Adrian and a helper were still at work on the peak of the roof. "A little, yes."

"Do they get paid more for working so late?"

"No-o. They would, some places, but we—can't afford it."

She said, "They're working for fun, then."

He smiled wryly. "I imagine they were so nearly through shingling the roof, they thought they'd stay and finish it tonight."

"Are they all finished fixing what the fire did?"

"On the outside. . . . Say, what do you know about people getting paid more for working late?"

"Daddy says they ought to. He says he'd have got sixty whole dollars more last month if he'd got paid for that."

Clint blinked. "My Lord! Did he figure that out for himself?"

"No, that—that homely driver with the limp and the hard name—"

"Lew Barchi?"

"He helped. Daddy was awful surprised."

"Mm-m!" Clint was also. He tried to do the mathematics in his head but lacked facts; maybe the farm *couldn't* afford overtime, he thought.

He shied off the subject: "Tell me, Nancy, what are you doing here? Are you supposed to cross the drive? Does Mother know?"

"I had to see where the fire was, and I was very careful crossing the drive, and she does. It was a bad fire, wasn't it, Mr. Matlock?"

"Sort of. Know my name, do you?"

"Yes. Your name is Clint, and Mummy says you're all right. Otherwise I shouldn't talk to you."

"I see. Then, if I'm properly acceptable, may I escort you home?"

Nancy said, "I don't mind being 'scorted much."

"You like it here?" Clint asked as they started across the lawn. "Don't bother being polite."

Studying him without humor, she responded gravely: "I like it fine 'cept for maybe the Vac'relli boys. They play rough and use bad words and tease me 'bout my coat and hat and things, these I have on."

"I think they're very nice myself."

"They're pretty, and Mummy likes um; but I want something old and black like Ginny's got so I won't have to be so careful. Then I'd show those 'Carellis. I'd kill um. . . . Here's home. I want you to come in."

Clint guessed he couldn't; but Nancy's mother appeared in the kitchen doorway to say: "Do come in! I want to talk to you, Mr. Matlock."

Meeting Mrs. North face to face for the first time, he decided she was the kind who took pride in being plain. Her hair, of which there was a lot, was drawn sharply back and knotted in a bun, and her pallid clear-skinned cheeks and thin lips were colorless; almost pointedly she had refused to improve upon nature.

"Mr. Matlock, I want you to walk upstairs with me."

"What's wrong?"

Nancy said: "I was trying to tell you. I almost did, Mummy."

"You had no business to."

"Well, he asked if I liked the farm, and I was going to tell him, on'y I didn't have time. He'll fix it up for us: you see if he won't. I gave him the works."

"Nan!"

Clint chuckled. "She certainly did. What's it all about?"

"We're cold," Nancy said, unsmiling.

"Come upstairs, please." Mrs. North led the way.

Once out of the kitchen where she had been cooking, Clint noticed the chill himself. As they went up, it became colder.

"The child has to dress and bathe in this," the mother said. "This is October only. What we'll do in winter, I don't know!"

"Have you started the furnace?"

"Of course. But it heats only the living room, and that not very well. We've talked to Mr. Thomas three separate times—"

"On'y nothing's happened," Nancy said. "And we're freezing!"

Clint nodded. "I believe you! This isn't right. I'll speak to him myself, see if we can get a little action."

"Nancy's had one cold already—and she *never* has them!"

"I'll do what I can. Of course I'm the lowest of the low in the office, and Ed Thomas is hard to start sometimes; but I'll try."

He was bothered by his own reluctance to promise results.

Clint spoke to the manager early next morning, and was met with a sigh.

"They've been at me before, Clint—Tom and his wife. If they'd be patient—"

"That's hard when you're cold. And they actually are."

"I know. Steve Ochs used to complain too. But what can I do? Red's sweating himself thin between the repair work in the storeroom and the regular garage schedule. With Vic Stewart out, Happy and he are run ragged. They haven't time to fix furnaces. When things have quieted down—"

"At least order the new one. Then it'll be here when—"

"The new one! What are you talking about? Why, a day's work'll put the old one in shape."

"I see," Clint said.

In the outer office, Wharton Pettit had overheard. He cleared his throat as Clint shut the partition door. "I've warned you Ed's jealous of authority. Take my advice and don't try that often."

"But, good Lord, Whart, a day's work! Why—a month's wouldn't make that a decent furnace. I looked at it. As a matter of fact, that house'll never be warm with only hot-air heating. It'll take radiators—"

"Do you know what you're suggesting?"

"Sure: a whole new heating system. It needs it!"

"That's the smallest part. D'you seriously think we could put a heating plant in one house only? Can't you hear the scream of protest—especially if a newcomer got it?"

Clint had no answer.

The bookkeeper added; "The Norths can't expect steam heat at the

rent they pay. Once they learn to run the furnace, they'll be fairly comfortable—"

"What if that little girl should be taken sick?"

"Steve Ochs raised four exceedingly healthy children there. You're being sentimental, Matlock, and sentiment in business costs you money every time. The Norths aren't forced to live there."

"But can you treat them heartlessly and expect loyalty?"

"Loyalty?"—with a crooked smile. "Business likes to talk about loyalty: it sounds good, and it ought to be true. But men are loyal to their living, Clint, and to their living only. We're all of us out for Number One; don't kid yourself. We'll be exactly as loyal to a business or an employer as we have to be to hold our jobs—and that's all. It follows: if you want loyalty, make a man's job dependent upon it, and don't coddle him. Very simple, but something Ed's never grasped."

"Neither have I," Clint said, "and I don't believe it."

Hal Roane's leg was a nuisance. Beyond an occasional acute twinge and a dull persistent ache deep in the very bone, it no longer hurt much; but it was a nuisance nevertheless. Fact was, he had recovered sufficiently so that his old urges were awake again; it was the end of October, nearly two weeks since the fire, and better than three, as it happened, since he had last had a woman.

The barriers against going out and looking for one were more psychological than physical. He could walk far enough and wear clothes long enough; but there would be the necessity for explanations, which he hated, and there was the way the burn looked, about which he was sensitive. It extended on the outside and back of the leg from above the knee downward across the calf to the ankle, a blotched, ugly scar on which the new skin was ugly. There was, too, the fear that some clumsy or careless contact might start one of those twinges which were sharp enough to rob him of strength; he could imagine nothing more humiliating than having that happen at a critical instant.

But the conflict of desire and reluctance were becoming acute. There was Bet, of course, who knew about the burn and the twinges; but he had sworn not to touch her, and he wouldn't, by God.

She was fussing around in the bedroom now, packing—they were moving to the farm on the 1st; but while Hal could have tossed together what they had in a couple of hours, Bet had to take three days. That was the woman of it. He could hear her walking about, occasionally see her, but was unable to decide what she was doing. She seemed

to be moving things from drawers, piling them on the bed, then removing them from the bed and piling them back in the drawers. He didn't bother to find out; it rather pleased him to think she was behaving like a fool.

In one way he was sorry to go. He liked this apartment though it was larger than he needed; it had been a symbol of the end of his flophouse days, and living here had bolstered his confidence and done him good. In another way, though, he was willing enough. If his wife—damn blast her soul!—had thought she was marrying money, she was crazy, and the greenhouse building at the farm would serve her right.

Propped on the sofa arm within reach of the radio, his leg stretched carefully at length, cooked side up, Hal's lips quirked with grim malice. He was dressed in pajama bottoms and nothing else, and with the evening paper scattered all around him he looked the epitome of masculine comfort. He was not. He had made a pretense of reading the news, but had been able to glance at the first page only. His attention had idled continuously while his mind and eyes wandered, following Bet through the bedroom door.

Once, bending, she had pulled a thread in her stocking and with a muttered "Damn!" had lifted her skirt to inspect the damage, then seeing he was watching, she had moved out of his line of vision, not realizing he could still see her in the mirror.

He had watched, mouth wry. Feminine thighs were no novelty, but unintentional glimpses of them always gave him a mild kick. Besides, Bet had good legs. Somewhere he had heard that the ankles of pregnant women thickened, but Bet's hadn't. Perhaps it was only talk; so many things were. Her legs were smooth and tapering, not as heavy as the rest of her, but nicely rounded.

She had other points too. Her body was beginning to look bulky—a relief to his suspicious mind; but aside from that she was all right. He had always liked her fleshliness—soft, yielding, warm—and her breasts, which were high, large, firm, and prominent. He liked the sultry darkness of her hair, the heavy-lidded, sleepy languor of her eyes, the broad, soft fullness of her mouth.

Thinking about her was a deliberate aggravation and, realizing it, he reminded himself that actually she looked more sensuously animal than she was; that her slow smile and the way she looked from beneath her eyelids held a bolder invitation than was justified.

She came from the bedroom, turning out the light.

"Through?" he asked, with sarcasm.

"Yes. For now."

She went to the radio. "Listening to this?"

He was tempted to say Yes, but satisfied himself with a grudging shrug. She found some dance music and stood a minute keeping time to it subtly with her body, before turning away and settling in the big chair across the room. Stretching for a magazine, she was careless about her skirts, and it annoyed him. She was not being deliberately provocative, he knew, for he had had samples of her provocativeness early in their marriage, and it had been broad, unsubtle, easily resisted. When it had ceased to amuse him he had told her brutally to cut it out. This was different. Now she was ignoring rather than teasing him, acting as though she were alone in the room, or with other girls, and Hal disliked being taken for granted in that particular way.

Hal wished she would go to bed, and then, thinking about it, hoped she wouldn't. Bed had become an increasingly difficult problem these last few days.

During the fall it had been easy enough, thanks to night delivery: to get his full sleep, he had had to retire as early as eight o'clock, and it was understood that Bet must wait till he was asleep and not waken him. When he woke by habit at two to go to work, she was asleep in her turn; and it had been simple to stick to his resolution. On his weekly night off, he had invariably sought his pleasure elsewhere, so that that had been no problem. Nor had there been any problem for a space after his return from the hospital, when he wouldn't have cared if Cleopatra had been in the same bed. More recently, feeling better, he had found his incontinent nature nibbling at his will power.

In a day or two, he told himself, he would overcome this self-consciousness about his scarred leg and get out of the house; then things would be all right again. In the meantime, he could stand it; some men did without girls for weeks and months.

Still, at the moment, it was driving him crazy. He was like a smoker without a cigarette or an alcoholic without a drink; he was simply unused to controlling himself in this respect. It had not been necessary since he was—what?—eighteen or nineteen. He sometimes wondered why girls had submitted to him so easily, for he knew he was graceless and morose, with no more manners, social sense, or eloquence than he had money; but the fact was, he had never found it hard to take the women he wanted. Thus his present abstinence, half self-imposed, half circumstance, was a torment.

And there was so little reason for it with a woman right in his bed:

only an odd pride stood in his way. But Hal held his grudges not in anger, but as solemn promises to himself; and, whatever else might be said of the man, his promise—to anyone—was good to the limit of his power.

Anyway, what was so alluring about her all of a sudden? She hadn't been so damned much fun!—reluctant, passive, letting him do what he liked under verbal protest and making no contributions of her own. Of course, now that she was his wife, now that they had a decent place for love making, she might drop her inhibitions. It might even be fun teaching her.

Not that he was going to, damn it!

Bet put her magazine down open, got up, went to the kitchen to explore the cake tin. "You want a pastry, Hal?"

He growled, "All right."

She brought him one, went to the window with her own, and stood with her back to him, looking into the street. After a while she returned to the kitchen to rinse her fingers, pausing on the way to set a small table to rights. Hal wondered how a woman could work all day long, seven days a week, on an apartment this size and still have anything left disordered.

Now she was fiddling with the radio. "Leave it alone," he said. "It's all right."

She left it, hesitated aimlessly, picked up part of the paper that lay on the floor, and stood above him glancing through it, rustling the pages. It occurred to him that she was as restless as he was, and his mind teased him: Was it for the same reason?

"For Christ's sake, sit down and keep still, can't you?"

"Aw, I'm sorry, Hal. I didn't know—"

She returned to her chair, hips swinging a little as she walked away from him. He glared at her back. She picked up her magazine and sat down. "What's wrong with the pastry, Hal? Don't you like it?"

"I'll eat it in a minute."

Like it? Sure, he did. He had never had anything like these little pastries. Hunyock recipes, he supposed, but he liked them fine.

Oh, Bet was a good cook, not fancy: there were no frills, no dishes served because they looked nice. She came from a people that liked substantial food and knew how to fix cheap meat in plenty of different ways so that it tasted good.

Hal was surprised; the two of them ate at home for slightly less than what he had paid for himself alone, eating out. For a while he had been

tempted to believe that two, after all, might live as cheaply as one. But then she had needed a new, and looser, dress . . .

There was a station break on the radio, and Bet bounced up again.

He said irritably, "Let that thing alone, damn it!"

"But, Hal—"

"Let it stay till we know what's coming next."

"I was just—"

"Leave it alone!"

He reached out, dragging her from it while she resisted. She cried, "Wait, Hal!" but he held her away, his arm about her thighs.

Then she stopped struggling, looking down at him oddly, and he was abruptly conscious of warm flesh beneath her dress, of the contour of legs and buttocks beneath his hand.

Blood bolted to his heart, and he felt hollow with the abrupt violence of the emotion. He saw her breathing flutter and quicken, and she made no move at all to get away.

He thought: She did it on purpose; she sneaked up on me!

But he had to have her now, and they both knew it. The second his arm tightened, she slid easily toward him.

"Your burn, Hal! Watch out for it—"

"To hell with it!"

She gasped, "Don't worry. I'll remember and be careful. Don't think of it again." She buried her face in his chest. "Thank God, Hal!"

His grip was convulsive. "Don't take this to mean—Damn you!"

She cried: "I want to take it on any terms, Hal. Don't you know?"

"This'll interest you, Whart," Ed Thomas said. He extended a letter. "From Melius about the new creamery. The bids were opened, the contract's signed. Fifty-two-thousand-odd! They'll break ground before the end of the month—November 25th. November 25th, Whart! I've looked forward to it for so long I can hardly believe it. He says foundations'll be in before frost, and the walls and roof up, if we're lucky, before snow!"

The bookkeeper said calmly, "We'll need it before it's ready."

"He congratulates us on our third-quarter statement, too—"

"Then he'll like October. The rest of the farm crops will be in, and milk sales hit a new high again. And speaking of sales—" Wharton Pettitt pointed at the pay-roll checks he had put on the manager's desk for signature. "See that top one?"

"Barchi's? We're still paying him his guarantee, I see?"

"Yes, but it expires after another month—in December."



"How much under the guarantee are his earnings?"

"Plenty! Since his route was cut, he hasn't put on one quart beyond the usual vacation returns of September." Petitt watched his chief's frown with a critical eye. "Expect him in here next month with a big sob story: how hard he's worked, how lousy his territory is, how unfair it'll be to drop that guarantee."

"I suppose," Ed sighed. "Well, we'll drop it all right. He understands the mechanism of route cutting, and six months is long enough to put on fifty quarts if a man works at it. He's been dogging it, Whart."

The bookkeeper nodded. Ed was frequently coldly flat with others, but Whart saw so much of his vacillation that he was a little surprised. "Good!" he said. "But he may cause trouble just the same."

Thomas usually weakened in the face of trouble, but he said this time, "I'm getting fed up with Barchi."

"Clare North stopped by yesterday," Sonia Goetz said. "It's the first time we've really talked, and I liked her. She'd been to see Ed Thomas."

"I know. He turned her down about the furnace once more."

"Clint, you've no idea how that's hurt her. She's a woman who dislikes asking favors anyway, but—beyond that—she hates to believe the other farm women may have been right about him; she despises them so! When I saw her, she'd just come from Mrs. Walsh's. Blanche, Kate, Roxy—all that crowd—were there having one of their choicer sessions, I judge, when she stopped by after seeing Ed."

She paused to move the floor lamp slightly, so that its light fell short of the couch. But her husband muttered: "'S all right. Not in my eyes."

"They gave her the usual stuff?" Clint Matlock asked.

"She said they started in on the Roanes. It seems young Stewart was invited to dinner in return for saving Hal's life— Any cracks from the gallery? But, in addition, he's called on them a couple of times since they moved into the greenhouse building a week ago. Also he's made some remarks about the rude and abusive way Hal treats Bet. Well, you can imagine the story that's started."

Clint shook his head wordlessly.

"Then too, they suspect Bet's having a baby."

He grinned. "Jumping the gun, aren't they?"

"Probably," Sonia said, a shade grudgingly. "Clare made some similar remark, and asked, with sarcasm, what had become of Freda Ellis's 'baby' of last summer. Whereupon Blanche Ochs made the bald statement that Freda had got rid of it. That, on top of everything, was too

much for Clare, and she came to me in a temper. She was actually weeping. She's getting so she hates this place, Clint."

He nodded. "A pity too, because, except for Ed, it need never have happened. I think it's his procrastinating about it I resent, his blaming it on Red's being busy. At least Whart is honest and says outright we can't give her her furnace lest the rest of the farm rise in wrath."

She said stoutly, "I still think that, when Ed sees his way financially, he'll make a clean sweep of all these small chores together."

"But, by waiting, he's begging trouble needlessly."

"You mean, antagonizing Tom?"

"Lew Barchi's been after him already."

Ben said from the sofa, "He's been after all of us."

"There's a saving grace: Tom's got ambitions. If we put on one more route, we'll need a new relief driver, and Tom would like to be it."

"He'd make a good one," Ben mumbled.

Sonia's voice had an edge. "You've been here longer than he has, Ben. You should get that job—and could, if you'd go after it!"

"Me? A-a-ah! Here I have trouble delivering the same route every night. Imagine me remembering five or six different ones."

"You could—easily."

"Besides, I've a hunch: there wouldn't be work enough to keep two relief men busy, so they'll probably make the new one a part-time salesman—everybody's been saying so—and I'd be no good at that."

"Anyway," Clint said, "as long as Tom has that hope he won't make trouble. But Ed may have other plans, and it's such a needless risk to run! A few hours of Red Walsh's time—or a few dollars spent for outside help—isn't much for insurance."

Sonia said: "It's hard to argue a specific case. I'm sure when the new creamery's finished and there's cash in the bank—"

"Every case is specific to someone. It's the evil of generalities that they take the flesh-and-blood out of an argument. It's so easy to forget inconvenience and suffering when you lump a group together."

"You can't have unbiased, unemotional judgment unless you do."

"Lose your personal touch, and what good is judgment?"

She said stiffly: "I don't want my decisions swayed by sympathy. I'd rather judge by ultimate good. The expansion of the dairy will benefit us all far more than any single reform. In fact, that's the sum-solution of all our complaints. So I'm against everything that'll slow our growth, and if the Norths' furnace means furnaces for everybody, and that in turn means embarrassing the dairy, I'm afraid I'm against it."

Ben said, "Hey now—let's not fight. A furnace alone wouldn't change Tom any. Not if you could keep Barchi away from him. It's Barchi who's dangerous. Hell, he's already lined up Roane and the Chief."

"Lined them up? You mean like last summer?"

"No! They mean it this time. I tell you Barchi—all of them have changed. They're sore for some reason, and they're serious. It's not a game now; they're not doing it out of fun, high spirits, or hell-and-the-devil. They mean business. Barchi's quit pounding the table; just kids and jokes and won't say anything serious until he gets you alone, and even then not much. He sort of makes his point and walks off, leaving you thinking. About this salesman, he's right too. Even the office admits we need one. I know my route'd grow faster and I'd be earning more; and he's shown me how it'd cut down my hours, too. I didn't realize before how long I worked."

Clint said: "For fun I checked on some of the boys last week. You know how many hours you actually worked, Ben? Sixty-nine. If we'd been paying overtime above forty-eight, you'd have got twenty dollars more—"

"Oh, well, hell! I'm first to load, see? The others start later an' get back about the same time. I like to start early—"

"But you all had overtime last week. Seventy dollars' worth in all."

"We-ell, last week was first-of-the-month. Besides, we don't work all the time we're out. Between delivering and collecting we snooze awhile or get breakfast at a dog wagon. And when we get on daylight delivery I'll go to work at six instead of two, and get in only a little later—unless the weather's bad."

"The other drivers won't argue against themselves so hard."

Ben was serious. "I see the farm's position better."

"How does Barchi plan to get this salesman?"

"He says we can't, but the boys are going to try a petition."

Sonia said: "You stay out of it, Ben. Don't you sign anything."

"This is all right," her husband said. "It's our own idea. We're not using threats. We'll just ask. It might work, and a salesman *would* help."

"Oh, no, Ben! Don't mix in it. It's the first step in a crooked game. It's the come-on. Once you start, you'll never stop."

Clint said slowly: "It could be on the level; and if it is—there's a chance there for intelligent cooperation—"

"You can't mean it, Clint—"

"I do. As long as Ed Thomas brushes off the individual, there'll be need of collective pressure; on the other hand, he bristles at force and

gets stubborn. Now there must be ground between, where he and the rest of us can get together with understanding and compromise."

"But can you picture the drivers—"

"After all, they're our skilled labor, our highest type. As long as Barchi, Roane, and the Chief don't dominate the—the organization—"

Ben protested sleepily, "There's no talk of organizing."

"Oh, Ben, don't be stupid!"

"Once you've all signed the petition, it'll be a *de facto* organization, no matter what you choose to call it," Clint agreed.

"And an organization contains in itself the core and unit of violence," Sonia insisted. "Even if there's no intention of using force, who's to say that in the heat of argument the threats won't start? The implication of force is there. Oh, Ben, Clint, can you have any honest doubt what Barchi intends, once the organization exists? Can you imagine those three thugs letting the milder men run it—"

"Lew Barchi's no thug." Clint frowned. "You know, the real way to handle him would be to put him in charge of the routes—"

"Oh, dear!" Sonia said, rather blankly.

"I mean it. He's a fanatic: his own side—whichever it may be—is pure white; the other side, tar-black. But give him a foot in the opposite camp, divide his allegiance, and you reduce him to impotence—or compromise. I suppose Ed and Whart could hardly see that, though."

"Nor I, frankly! He's a disloyal, whining, malcontent—"

"He's a Communist," Ben said from the sofa.

Clint chuckled. "Not in any literal sense. He's too practical. He'd yell his head off at communal ownership, liking what he has too well."

Ben was annoyed. "I meant he was a born agitator."

"Whart says a 'born troublemaker.' But what's behind it? Not gain, surely. He wouldn't risk his job for a mere twelve and five, would he?"

"He's a cripple," Sonia said, on a questioning note.

Clint said, "Frankly, I've wished for a long time that I knew what made him tick. It might be important, might give us a line on how serious he was, how far he'd go, what methods he'd use—"

"Let's have him over to dinner some night—his night off, when he won't have to leave early—and try to get him talking. It shouldn't be hard! And we might find out something about him."

"Be an interesting experiment," Clint said, "if it worked."

Ben demurred. "Tuesday's his night off. I couldn't sit up talking on a Tuesday night. Besides, I don't know him well enough: he'll think it's funny, my asking him to dinner."

"Oh, no, he won't! And I can handle him myself."

"But you don't like him; you've said so. You said he was—"

"That doesn't matter, Ben. He's dangerous. To the farm and—and to us personally. Anything I can do to— Let's ask him, Ben. What do you say? For next week?"

"Oh, well—if you want."

But Clint warned: "I wouldn't expect too much, Sonia. Brother Barchi, no matter what else he may be, is not dumb."

## IX

THE pattern of the window, cast by the street light near the barn, flared broadly across the ceiling and spread, odd-angled, down the far wall. Funny! It was a pattern so familiar he could have drawn it in chalk in the daytime, yet he had always thought of it before as a rectangle. Two dark straight bands crossed it, and one lighter straggling line. The bands were the shadow of the sash, and the only parts of the pattern that ever changed; they grew farther apart as the weather warmed, and crept back together in winter. Tonight they were close, for it was cold and the wind drove in.

The lighter line was a crack in the plaster. He couldn't trace it in this light, but knew how it ran: diagonally across the room, sketching the outline of a woman's body, shoulder and waist, breast and thigh. He had never pointed it out to his wife.

Then there was the place on the far wall where one corner of the light-panel was blurred by the wind-tossed branches of a sapling in the back yard. He remembered the stormy night he had first seen it, and how he had had to get out of bed to learn what it was. The little tree had grown since then. Some day its shadow would be there even when the night was still, if he was here to see it—but he wouldn't be.

No premonition this, but simple acceptance of cold truth.

Wind whistled about the house, making the shadow-branches dance and the window sash tremble. It was raw against his nose and cheek and strong enough to lift a tendril of Roxy's hair. In spite of blankets and his wife's body, it chilled him a little, for he was thin-blooded.

Roxy lay against him limply, her breathing so shallow he was barely aware of it save for its intermittent warmth against his shoulder. She

seemed exhausted, but he himself gloried in the sensual weariness of weighted bones and muscles utterly relaxed. Characteristically it was in such moments that his mind was most lucid and alive. The fuzzy aura of feeling that clouded his daytime thought was gone, and for a few minutes his anxieties, disappointments, and dislikes were laid to rest, and problems, losing their vague complexity, leapt into focus. Whatever he thought was so: factual, undistorted by hopes or dreads, instinctive truths. It was thus that he saw calmly that his days at Weyland Meadows were numbered.

Sometimes he was conscious of actual affection for Roxy because she could make him feel like this, sure of himself. Too often he felt old, unable to cope with the problems of living, painfully aware of failure. She was part—even symbol—of that failure; yet abed he was grateful to her, for there he could assert his youth and vigor and find in her response reassurance and bolstered self-esteem.

Thoughts of her never held him long, however, and tonight, following his eyes aloft, his mind had discovered the light-pattern of the window which he knew so well. He thought how in a little while, when the boys reached the barn for the midnight milking, its edges would become—not obliterated, for the new patterns cast by the barn lights would be less bright—but blurred and indecisive. Later, when the creamery started work, the pattern would have even greater complexity, a complexity old and unchanging, yet always new.

Unchanging? Humph!

After watching for years, he had missed the one night when a new element had been added: the night when fire must have set a moving panel of red wavering across all the others. He had been asleep, and Ihloff's alarm on the hoop had jerked him awake and across to the window without a glance at the ceiling. He felt cheated, like an astronomer who has dozed through an eclipse, and he tried now in vain to recapture the moment.

What had he thought? Nothing intelligent, he guessed, or worthy of a crisis. Had he wondered how the fire started? or if it had been set? No, nothing so keen.

But it had been set. He was sure of it, had always been sure of it; it needed no confirmation from tonight's moment of truth to convince him.

True, he was virtually alone in believing so. The farm, after speculating, had admitted regretfully that accident was more likely; and the office, he knew now, had probably accepted that answer from the moment they were convinced of Boo Fusek's innocence. This meant there

had been no attempt at all to blame the fire on—on anyone—on him. He had been wrong there; imagined things!

He was thankful, knowing this, that Boo, that night at the dump, had found his legs when he did; he could still feel the cold flat surface of the tire tool in his hand, the fear, hate, and anger that had urged him to use it. It was something he disliked to recall, for, whoever had set the fire, it had not been Boo. Come to think of it, the boy's denial had never surprised him; all along he had known in his heart that taking revenge was not like happy-go-lucky Boo. No, changing jobs was part of the day's work to a kid of that type, and he would hold no grudge.

Actually, there was no need to look for someone who had been kicked out to find a motive for setting that fire. A dozen people had better ones, real or imagined, than Boo had had. There was—

His thought stumbled and paused, for he knew suddenly who had done it. He had just found out, yet in an odd way had known all along. He thought: Of course! It was no surprise. He wondered why the knowledge had not reached his consciousness long before; and while he wondered it was seeping from brain to body so gently that he scarcely noticed till, belatedly, he felt its shock. A warm tingling spread from his body and broke in gooseflesh on his arms and legs; a burning sensation compounded of conviction, revulsion, fear, and hate swelled fever-hot in his throat.

The moment of truth had passed, and Charlie Dann's body and its emotions were awake again.

Roxy stirred and lifted her head. "Gee, Charlie! You're sweating all over! What's a matter—huh?"

## X

EDGING into the office diffidently, Hack Dunty said, "Uh—Whart? 'Fore you go to lunch—"

The bookkeeper shoved the drawers shut, took the green tin cash box from the desk to the safe. "What do you want?"

"I stopped at Zenith Restaurant, see?" Dropping his route book, Hack fished out his wallet. His close-set eyes roamed restlessly, first to the other desk where Clint Matlock sat, then to the empty inner office as

though seeking the manager. "I was collectin' for the October milk, see? Well, they give me this. Do you get it? Or Carly?"

"Their check? Carly, naturally. What would I want with it?"

"But it isn't—it ain't mine. The guy at Zenith missed the ice-cream driver, so he gave me both checks: ice cream as well as milk. Here's the ice-cream one: ninety-four twenty-eight."

Wharton Pettitt muttered something about milkmen, took the check, glanced at it, and carried it to the cash box he had put in the safe. Dunty watched him turn the safe handle down afterward and putter into the inner office for his coat and hat. Then he returned to the drivers' room while Pettitt went down the stairs and left the building.

Carly Groce was on his way to lunch too. He said, "Clint'll check you in. Early today, aren't you?"

The place settled to an unnatural quiet in which the sound of the adding machine in the other office was loud. Hack took his time. Cocking his feet on the desk, he let his eyes wander and smoked a cigarette at his leisure. Then he found the sales sheet that Carly had ready for him, and set to work on it with deliberation.

After this he gazed out of the window awhile.

As he watched, Jake Larsen's truck came tearing up the County Road. At sight of it, Hack's small features became anxious, and he listened in impatience to the steady roll of the adding machine.

Presently he began listing collections; then he got out his money, counted it, sat staring at it. After a while he smoked another cigarette. Time raced and dragged.

He compared his wrist watch with the office clock through the connecting window. It was getting late, and still Clint held to his steady pace. Every passing minute brought closer the one when Jake would finish unloading and come up.

Well—you couldn't expect every gamble to work out.

The adding machine stopped, a chair scraped, and Hack held his breath. Steps crossed the office, and Matlock emerged on the landing.

"Hey—don't go nowhere till my book's checked, huh?"

"Just to the john," Clint said. "Be with you in a minute."

And the storeroom door closed behind him.

Hack moved swiftly now, slipping into the office and hurrying to the safe behind Pettitt's desk. The bookkeeper had not turned the dial that locked it, and as the handle lifted to his touch the door swung open.

The cash box was on the top shelf, and the Zenith Restaurant check



was inside it. Dunty took it, closed the box and the safe, stepped back to the desk, and hesitated half a second, listening. All was quiet out back, but a glance from the window showed Jake Larsen coming across from the garage where he had left his truck.

Hack opened Pettitt's top right-hand drawer. There were a half-dozen rubber stamps in it, and the third he picked up was the one he wanted. Without taking time to ink it, but making sure that he had it on the proper end of the check, and that it was right side up, he pressed it down, viewing the result critically. It read: "For Deposit Only, Weyland Meadows Dairy."

The stamp went back into the drawer, which he closed with a shove; the check went into his pocket, and he was at a table in the drivers' room working on his route book when Jake came up. When Clint returned, the two were chatting casually.

Charlie Dann came up to the manager's desk hesitantly, his nervous eyes roving, then turned back to close the door between the offices.

"I want to get rid of one of the boys," he said.

Ed Thomas sighed. "What's wrong?"

The other's lips set, and his hands became as restless as his eyes.

"Who, Charlie?"

"Flemhos."

"What's he done?"

"Does that matter? I'm boss of the barns, ain't I?"

"Of course, but I think I should know your reason."

"I want to get rid of him."

"Well, now, look," Ed began. Then he stopped and shrugged. "I don't care for Flemhos personally and don't think much of him as a workman. Nevertheless, I can't—just—fire him out of hand—summarily deprive him of his living. Turnover's a loss to a business, and it'd be bad for the farm's morale besides."

"There are plenty of reasons. Take my word."

"You're making this difficult. I'm afraid—"

Charlie Dann scowled. "A' right then. He set fire to the creamery."

"Set fire—What makes you think so?"

"That's hard to say. That's why—"

Ed smiled. "I don't think anyone set that fire, Charlie. True, we thought Boo Fusek might have; but the fire inspector and the insurance man are both satisfied it was an accident. So am I!"

"I'm not! That fire was set, and Flemhos set it!"

"Why?"

"Because he was sore at our firing Boo."

Ed's lips twirled, and one eyebrow came down. "Oh, now, Charlie?"

"He and Boo were like that!"

"It looks indecent, and I think you're crazy."

"I ain't. I been working with him a long time. I seen him and Boo together. I seen him the night Boo left. I seen him since Boo's been gone, and I know how he feels. I know how he's always felt about the farm, and I know what kind of guy he is. He's got a vicious streak in him like a mad bull. Sure as hell, he set this place afire!"

Ed said, "You're letting your dislike run away with you, Charlie. Of course if you can *prove* any of it— But I won't get rid of anyone for the mere whim of it—and don't forget that!"

"So he told me to go to hell." Charlie was bitter. "He wouldn't listen. That's what I count for around here now."

Mickey Pratt said, "But, Jesus, Charlie! What you want to tell him a crazy yarn like that for? Be reas'nable! You and Dick got a feud, sort of, and everybody knows it. Well, naturally, you believe bad of him, so you got this idea about the fire—you been screwy over it from the start. But it don't make sense, Charlie! If Boo had done it— But Dick doing it because Boo got fired— Na-a-a-ah! And if he did, why'd he pick the creamery? Why not the barns? They'd make a bigger an' better one, and it'd mean something! But for a barn hand to burn the creamery— Aw, no, Charlie! Geel!"

The barn man's voice was strained: "He set it. I know he did. Ed don't have to believe it, and neither do you. Nobody has to. But I *know*. And if he did it once— I tell you I'm going to get rid of him. In spite of Ed. I'll find an excuse, and one good enough for anyone—see if I don't! . . . Or make one—if I have to."

Mickey said: "Aw, for the love of— Forget it, can't you?"

Hack Dunty came in well after four o'clock on Monday, and only Tom North and Carly Groce were in the drivers' room.

"Where you been?" Tom asked. "Get lost?"

"Nah. Big day: sixty bucks. Ev'rybody paid me. Am I last?"

Carly said: "No! The Chief's still out. . . . What are *you* scowling for? It's me that's sore: I gotta leave at five. Come on—get busy."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Hack sat at a table close to Carly's desk and got to work. "How much you bring in, Tom?"

"Oh, forty-five. People on my route seemed to think Armistice Day was a holiday—for paying bills."

"How'd the other boys make out? Got enough to cash my October check, Carly—one-forty?"

"Yeah—guess so. Give it here."

"Aw, it was cashed a week ago!" Hack thumbed his nose.

Tom North finished up and departed. Hack worked methodically, finishing his sheet, checked in; then, instead of leaving, he sat down and took his route book apart to put in some new pages.

Carly, who had been stewing half articulately, exploded with "Where in God's name is Myhychyk anyway? What's keeping him?"

"He'll be up in a minute, prob'ly."

"What d'ya mean? Has he come in?"

"Sure. Fifteen minutes ago." This stretched the truth by ten.

"Well, why doesn't he come up?"

"Prob'ly got some new dirty stories to tell Ihloff."

Carly fumed but did nothing, and Hack shrugged mentally: a gamble was a gamble, and you couldn't win 'em all. In a way the Chief's being late was a break, though he had not thought so at first; it might still get Carly out of the way. If it didn't . . .

Well, he could destroy the check. He had risked nothing so far.

No use holding it for later because today's collection would be the last large one in November. The sixty he had turned in was the result of holding up Friday's, Saturday's, and Sunday's money and adding to it every cent he could scrape up today after working like a dog. With what the others had collected, there must be enough not only to cash the check, but to make its cashing inconspicuous.

Presently he said: "If you're in a hurry, why not go down and tell the Chief? He don't know it, remember."

"He wouldn't hurry if he did," Carly muttered, but put the cash box in a desk drawer (an ostrichlike precaution which Hack Dunty had noticed on other occasions) and shoved back his chair.

Dunty made sure he was alone, then crossed to Groce's desk, sat down at it and opened the drawer. Working coolly, he took only the largest bills, so that the bulk of the bills would seem comparatively undiminished.

Seventy, eighty, eighty-five, ninety—and four ones. At the bottom of the box he found a quarter and three pennies more.

Stuffing the money into one pocket, he fumbled in another for the Zenith check. Verifying the amount, he slipped it into the money box

beneath some other checks so that it wouldn't be conspicuous; then he closed the box and the drawer, returned to his table, and resumed work on his route book.

He was willing to bet Carly would never notice the check. Why should he? His deposit would balance since nothing was missing from it. But if he did notice it, he would only think the office had needed some change and cashed it, as they frequently did when they were short.

Boldness, he thought, was the complement of being clever. And the carelessness at Weyland Meadows was something not to be wasted.

## XI

THE white sack coverall that was the drivers' uniform had always seemed so much a part of Lew Barchi that his appearance in a spruce brown business suit was disconcerting, making Sonia Goetz realize how little she actually knew of him. The farm, surfeited with one aspect of his personality, was virtually ignorant of every other, and sight of him in expensive, tailored clothes a shade too young in color and cut changed her conceptions too radically and too abruptly for her peace of mind.

While Ben took his coat and hat, she apologized for the way she looked, having just come from the kitchen; but he was complimentary and said he understood the difficulties of cooking and entertaining too. Having somehow assumed he would be shy and tongue-tied in company, she found his social assurance disconcerting also.

Indeed, she was glad of the excuse dinner offered to retire to the kitchen and reassemble her thoughts and impressions. Studying him critically through the doorway while he talked with Ben in the living room, she decided she had done him some injustice. His ugliness had prejudiced her, though some of the nicest men she knew were ugly: you couldn't judge a man by his face. It also occurred to her sharply that running a route must be almost as wearing for him as it was for Ben—particularly with a crippled leg; his was a tough, wiry strength, but his five-foot-seven carried little more than a hundred and thirty pounds, and he must be—what?—something well over forty. It was hard to guess, for his face was marked with experience rather than years.

With everything but the biscuits ready in the warming oven, she removed her apron, smartened herself before the kitchen mirror, and

joined the men. Ben, a gentle, reminiscent smile on his lips, was spinning a fishing yarn which he cut short as she appeared.

"Please don't stop!" she said. And to Barchi: "I suppose you're interested? All men love fishing, don't they?"

"I wouldn't know," he said. "I never done any."

"But I supposed all boys—at one time or another—"

"Not when they live in a city! Oh, we tried in the river below Pound Street sometimes, but that wasn't—real fishing."

So he had been a city boy and had lived in the Pound Street district! That accounted for a lot: it was a pretty poor section. Preening herself over her first easy nugget of information, she said, "I certainly wouldn't want to eat anything caught there!"

"We'd've been plenty glad to, most of us; only there wasn't much—for very good reasons. Just an occasional little guy that didn't know any better. 'Member one we pulled out was green around the gills and plenty glad of a breath of fresh air!"

By the time he had, with straight-faced solemnity, conducted his little fish to the frying pan via a Turkish bath and a quick workout at the Y.M.C.A., Sonia's biscuits were done, and she had to dish up. She was not much amused by the yarn, disliking the humor of exaggeration, but found it interesting that Barchi possessed any humor at all.

Dinner went well. She had not been sure what good food would mean to him, but had made an effort and was pleased at the heartiness with which he ate. His social sense, she noticed, extended to table manners though his large hard workman's hands, their nails trimmed painfully close, were awkward with silver. He talked readily, but still in that light and frivolous vein, with an unobtrusively crazy turn of phrase to which Ben took like a pheasant to brush, having latent talent himself in that direction. It contributed only minor generalities to her knowledge of him, so she took the conversation into her own hands over dessert:

"Mr. Barchi, I want your help. I'm trying to persuade Ben to—to give up his job. To leave here. I think, while he's still young, he ought to get into a business where there's a future."

Ben looked surprised. "But, Sonia, honey—"

"Now don't interrupt. I want Mr. Barchi to tell you, as I have, that this is a perfectly hopeless place to work."

She prayed for an answer betraying something of his true attitude toward the farm, but Barchi said merely: "Well—a job's a job."

"You mean, even if it's not much of a one?"

His shrug was noncommittal, and she had to try again:

"Ben hates being a milkman, and there are lots of jobs he could do which would get him further."

"If he don't like it," Barchi said seriously, "that's reason enough for quitting. A guy oughta like what he's doin'. If he don't, it's no good for him, even if he could get to be Pres'dent doing it."

Ben objected mildly; Barchi argued, and Sonia sighed. What Lew Barchi thought about jobs was not what she wanted to know. Apparently it was one carefully calculated gambit wasted.

The men carried the discussion through dessert and coffee without much help from her, and when she returned to the living room after clearing the table and stacking the dishes they were still at it. Ben in particular had the bit in his teeth. He could sit at home twenty-nine days out of a month, she thought acidly, doze all evening, saying no more than half a dozen words to her; but when she wanted him to shut up and go to bed, he would acquire a talking jag. That was the husband of it!

She tried unobtrusively to turn the talk Barchi's way, or give him openings; but he ignored them or went off at tangents which only provided Ben with new starting points. For two hours, the talk stayed in Ben's hands in spite of her; and his expansiveness grew until she twice suggested oversweetly that it was time for him to go to bed. She was furious with him, for when he finally did choose to go it was after nine, and Barchi rose with him. She said swiftly:

"Oh, but you can't go. Not this early?"

"It's after nine. That's late for us."

"But you can sleep in the morning! It's your day off, isn't it?"

"Um-m. But I been up since three—"

"But you can't eat and run!"

Ben said belatedly: "I didn't mean to break it up. I'll stay down awhile rather than that. I'm not sleepy anyway."

Sonia said hastily, "You will be by two in the morning! Go along, Ben. Mr. Barchi'll stay awhile, I know."

"No, I can't. Honest. It's late—"

"But if I say Please— I want you to. Really!"

The guest looked at her oddly and yielded. Ben said Good night.

When they were alone, Lew Barchi fumbled for cigarettes, offered Sonia one, lit one himself, and subsided on the sofa, watching her curiously, eyes half veiled against the smoke. Sonia tried light comments about a milkman's ungodly hours, but got little response. Her mention

of daylight delivery got less. The weather was equally unsuccessful. He was suspicious of her, waiting till she tipped her hand.

She damned Ben for talking so much and staying up so late, and for a bleak moment felt hollow with failure. Then she resolved to make the best of it; there were still a few tricks in the bag.

She said with pseudo frankness: "Perhaps I'd better confess. I had a reason for wanting you to stay, Mr. Barchi. When I said at dinner that I wanted Ben to leave the dairy, I meant it. And yet— It's hard to explain. If he leaves, it—it has to be by choice—not because he's been fired."

Through the cigarette haze Barchi said, "Um-m-m!"

"Ben hates being a milkman, and I can't believe he's good at it. That's what I want to know: if he's so bad that—he's in danger?"

"So that's what you want, is it?" he said mildly.

"Everybody knows you're our best driver. You make the most money, win all the sales contests, have the lowest outstanding and the fewest deadheads. You know your business . . . so I'd—I'd trust your judgment."

"You flatter me," he said. And the quirk of his lips told her he meant just that.

Deciding that she hadn't been too subtle about it, she plunged on, clumsily: "It's not knowing that's awful. Oh, if it wasn't driving me crazy, be sure I wouldn't discuss it with a virtual stranger. But I lie awake nights worrying—"

Barchi cleared his throat: "Then rest easy. Ben don't like his job and makes hard work of it; but he can hold it all right." The gray face was solemn, but one eyebrow cocked up inquiringly on the last word as though to say: "All right—that's answered. What next?"

She fumbled, said desperately: "But if there were trouble?"

"What kind of trouble?"

She hesitated, but there was no retreat. "Ben tells me there's agitation among the drivers for a salesman. Well, he hates the selling end of his job so much that—that I'm afraid."

"Why? What of?"

"He might throw in with you and your friends," she said bluntly.

"Me? *My* friends? You got me wrong. This is the boys' idea, and I got nothin' to do with it. I held the bag once a'ready. They're doing their own planning an' their own talkin'. I'm just sitting back and laughing."

"You expect me to believe that—knowing you've talked to Ben—"

"I talked with all the boys. Why not? I figure we need a salesman, same as they do, same as the office does. Am I supposed to shut up when

ev'rybody else is hollering? I don't figure they'll get anything, though."

"You're not fooling me one bit, Lew Barchi! You started this. You're the—the yeast that's causing the ferment. And we both know it! You know that, once they act as a group, they'll be virtually organized, and if they don't get anything this way it'll be easy to urge them to something more drastic through resentment. You're counting on it!"

He smiled. "Oh, sure. So all you got to do to spoil it is make Ed Thomas give 'em their salesman."

"Then the value of organizing is proved, and they'll be ripe to make it permanent and try for something else."

"Well now, that's an idea," he said. "Thanks for the tip."

"Can't you see you're cutting your own throat? destroying your own living? If you'd put half the effort into building the business—into co-operating with the office—that you put into hampering their best efforts, they could soon afford to give you all you want. This could be quite a place, you know, if you'd let it be."

His bleached-gray eyes considered her narrowly. "You're not interested in the place," he said. "Not one bit."

"But I am. Very much! Why shouldn't I be?"

"Lots of reasons. For one, your legs are too pretty." Her startled look made him smile. "In my book, a woman with good legs, a nice figure, and your wispy kinda looks, don't bother much with business."

"If those are intended as compliments, thanks! But I have a mind as well, and am perfectly capable of using it—"

"You worry about Ben," Barchi interrupted. "O.K. I'll believe it. But dairying? Growth, expansion, progress, cooperation?" He mimicked her accents. "Na-a-ah! Whadda you care about that? At dinner you say there's no future here; now you want me to believe the dairy's little Moses in the bulrushes—"

She retorted furiously: "Both are true! I meant it at dinner, and I mean it now. This place *can* be big, but it never will be because you plan to wreck it! There's no limit to what it *could* be. But oh, no! You must have everything *now*. You haven't the vision to see what cooperation instead of obstructionism would do for us—"

"What's the word?" Barchi asked. "Cooperation? Yeah—I remember it. It means knuckling under to the office, don't it? Or perhaps: the men helping the management while the management help themselves?"

"It means the two of you working together," she cried. "It means being patient. It means letting the office get a little ahead before you demand everything."



Barchi was bland. "It certainly sounds reasonable. You oughta speak to Ed about it. We drivers 'd be glad to cooperate like that. All we ever wanted was our share. We're even willing to take it as crumbs from the master's table—provided we get it."

The jeering solemnity pricked her to rage. "You're all of you being utterly and completely blind. You're not giving Ed a chance. Look at both sides of an argument, why don't you, before you judge—"

"I could say the same to you, lady—but I won't. . . . Look now: I'm sorry I made you sore—it ain't any way for a guest to act. So now—if you won't object too hard this time—I think maybe I'll go home an' sleep on what you said."

He was laughing at her, and she was so angry she could have thrown something.

## XII

IN comparison with the dark, chill day outside, the barn was warm and heavy with the odor of animals, feed, and manure. Clint, brought up on a farm himself, sniffed with appreciation and grinned.

"Where's Charlie?" he asked. "Got the papers from the Holstein-Friesian Association he's been wanting all week."

Flemhos, working alone, gestured sullenly toward the cubbyhole back of the feed room. "In his office." And then, unexpectedly: "I'll take 'em in to him."

Clint handed over the package, but as he turned away the man muttered, "Hey—wanta see sumpin?"

He stood his shovel against the wall and led the way down the barn between the two long lines of cows. Clint followed reluctantly. He barely knew Dick Flemhos and had always been faintly repelled by him.

Dick stopped before one of the eighty-odd cows in the barn and turned back to Clint, his dark eyes hot beneath beetling brows. "You know who this is?" He put his palm against the animal's forehead. "This is Lucy: Weyland Ormsby Lucy Pride. Heard of her?"

"So this is the famous Lucy? Sure. Who hasn't? One of the finest Holsteins living today—anywhere."

Clint admired the animal with a dairyman's eye and praised her intelligently to the other's obvious pleasure; but he suspected there was more than this to Dick's drawing him aside.

When Lucy had had her due, the man proved Clint's guess right. With a cautious glance back toward the distant feed room, he whispered: "You're from the office, Clint. You'd know! They're trying to get me fired, ain't they?"

"If so, I hadn't heard of it."

"Honest?" The dark eyes were anxious, intense. "I know they're makin' up stories about me. Charlie don't like me, see? He never has." The dark face slid into a sullen cast. "All the time he sneaks up on me, watches me when he thinks I do' know he's around. He peeps in windows and stands behind doors to see if I'm on the job, tryin' to catch me loafing. I figure he's after an excuse to get rid of me."

"Why? No, Dick, Charlie wouldn't act like that—"

"No? Well, why am I here now, when the rest of the boys 've gone? 'Cause he makes me work overtime every day, hoping I'll get fed up and tell him to go to hell. And every time I clean the troughs, every time I wash a cow or rinse a pail or sterilize a milk can, he's right there to see how well I done it. He makes special tests of the milk from my string, trying to prove I get it dirty. He's after me—"

"Oh, well—"

"And when he isn't, Mickey is. Mickey Pratt. The two of 'em want to get something on me; then they'll get me kicked out."

"You're letting a dislike of Charlie run away with you."

Dick shook his head. "I don't like him, all right. I don't like much of anybody." He looked at Weyland Ormsby Lucy Pride, and his fingers played gently in the short hair between her eyes. "I like animals. I like cows—good cows. They never do you dirt." . . .

Watching Clint walk away, he wondered suddenly whether he had said too much. No talker usually, he had let his tongue run away with him. Clint might go straight to Charlie with what he had said.

But naw! He was a good guy; everybody said so.

A board creaked in the feed room, and Dick got hastily to work. That would be Charlie, spying on him again.

That week end the farm went on daylight delivery. It was time, for winter was on the way. Rich brown leaves still clung to the oaks; but the maples were stripped and gray, and there were dry, open cones beneath the spruces that hedged the orchard. Crows scavenged in the stubble of the grain fields, hawks volplaned in the sunshine, wedges of ducks and geese winged purposefully against the storm clouds. The grass was rich with faded greens, yellows, and magentas, and the fallen

leaves scudded and drifted as the snow would in months to come. The week was one of near-freezing weather, of cold rain, snow flurries, and a chill wind, so that the office was on edge, fearing a real cold snap that would bring an epidemic of frozen milk.

On Friday, both routes and dealers put out notices warning customers of the change and advising extra orders to cover Monday's breakfast. On Saturday the creamery gang came to work early and stayed late, bottling half again as much milk as they ordinarily did for a Sunday. They bottled so much that two trips had to be made to the producers, the barns had to contribute their afternoon milking, and even so Ed Thomas had to buy forty cans from outside. Handling so much taxed both receiving tanks and icebox. Some of the producers' milk stood outside all morning; luckily it was a cloudy, blustering, nearly freezing day, for weather warmer or colder by a few degrees might have meant trouble. The icebox situation would have been utterly impossible except for Quinlan, whose big trailer-truck took a full load to the urban area in the morning and then returned for a second. The bottle supply, critically tight, held out; the freezing system groaned but stood the load; the pasteurizing schedules, which threatened to become hash, never quite did, and the farm's various milks reached the bottler separately and at the proper times.

With Steve Ochs gone, the burden of the shift fell on Thomas rather than Larry. Knowing all that might go wrong, he hovered anxiously in the background all day, and was more exhausted than the men when the job was finished. Perhaps things had not gone as slickly as they used to go under Steve; but there had been no mishaps and no mistakes, and the manager had no illusions as to why. Leaving for home, he paused to shout his thanks to the tall tough, broad-faced young bottler.

Sunday was quieter than could have been hoped. Wharton Petitt and Carly Groce spent the morning in the office waiting vainly for trouble. A few special deliveries had to be sent, and one route ran short of the Vitamin D; but these were routine matters. The drivers drifted in about eleven o'clock boisterous and noisy with the knowledge that tonight they could sleep and tomorrow breakfast at home—as late as seven, some of them—then work a decent-length day for a change, and come back in time to loaf before dinner. No need to flop on the couch for forty winks, either: like other people, they could now have the evening to themselves, go to bed at ten, and still get a full night's sleep.

Moreover, the new schedule would bring a contact with customers that most of them craved; from now on they could pass the time of day

at each stop, and there would be no more of the silent lonely gaps between dog wagons which they had known all summer. Their already record sales would increase, and their earnings jump as they got better acquainted and pushed their extras, as old customers gave them leads to new ones, as collections increased with daily pressure. They were a noisy lot that morning, and with reason.

Once they had checked in and gone home, the creamery was oddly silent, for now, with the drivers working by day, the creamery gang were on the night shift, and the machinery downstairs was quiet. Only the clash of cans and bottles as Ihloff stacked empties and dumped returns disturbed the silence of the almost deserted building.

So winter came to Weyland Meadows Dairy. True, the week of cold weather came to an abrupt end on Monday morning, but that was to be expected. That was the way things went in the milk business.

Dick Flemhos awoke sweating, dreaming he was back at the greenhouses and had roused in the night to find Boo gone. He had been searching, calling his name—softly at first—then more loudly, more frantically.

Now he was really awake, wondering if he had called aloud.

Oz Tatum was snoring in the corner bed. Mickey Pratt and the two other barn boys who shared the dormitory seemed to be asleep too. Their breathing was heavy, regular—but one of them might be pretending.

Mickey might be.

Dick shivered and pulled the covers closer. The room was cold, really cold, well below freezing for the first time this fall. He was chilled through, and a little queasy besides. Mrs. Greenbaum's Thanksgiving dinner had been too big. He should have had better sense, knowing how an upset stomach gave him nightmares and nightmares made him talk . . .

It might have been on purpose, her having so big a meal. He knew it was no accident that in moving him to the boarding house they had put him into the bed next to Pratt; they knew he talked in his sleep, and many a night Mick had lain awake listening, hoping. Since that hadn't worked, they were trying new tricks.

He had only called Boo's name though, and that would mean nothing --by itself--would it? No. No, of course not.

He had tricks of his own, Dick had. He had set his mind like an alarm clock, thinking hard before going to sleep, "If you start to dream,

wake up. . . . If you start to dream, wake up!" And he had wrinkled his forehead hard, because it helped. Now he was awake—before he had said anything bad either, he was pretty sure.

It was tough though, watching yourself all day and all night too—tough having two against one. At the barns it was Charlie Dann. Between times, it was Mickey Pratt. Mickey went through his things every so often—but so what? The this-and-that wouldn't find anything. All there was to find was in his head; so unless he talked at night—

. . . or fell for a trick. It was hard to be careful all the time. They gave you one nasty job after another and checked everything you did. God how he had worked—more when they weren't there than when they were, because it was then they watched you! Sometimes hate filled you so you couldn't stand it. Your hands shook on your shovel, wanting to use it as a weapon—but you told yourself: Obey orders, no matter what. Crush your temper down. Don't say it. Don't even look it.

Sometimes he had to stop and remember why it was he must hang onto this job he hated so. Sometimes, in his determination to outlast Charlie, he could not remember even when he did stop. But then it would come in a flash as blinding as lightning: Boo was going to write to him! Once he was settled in another job, Boo would write to tell Dick where he was, and perhaps send for him. So of course he had to wait! How else could Boo's letter reach him? And it would be soon now, too, for Boo had been gone a month and a half; he must have another job, or he'd be out of money.

Poor Boo! Never taking anything serious, never caring what happened to him. . . . Most guys were bastards—out for themselves—willing to kick the other guy in the teeth if they could—like Charlie and Mick. Yeah, and himself. . . . But not Boo. Boo didn't have bad thoughts about people, and wouldn't believe people did about him. Funny guy. Dick had warned him—had known the farm was out to get them both; but Boo had just grinned. And they had got him. A doctor had sworn he was sick when he felt fine—it had been that easy. But Boo hadn't got sore. No. He'd gone off that night still grinning; you could tell by the sound of his sandy voice shouting goodbye as his car turned to follow Charlie's down the County Road.

Funny guy—liking girls the way he had—and then drawing off if Dick even tried to touch him. . . . But if he had been queer some ways he had been swell in others—in most. He was the one man who had ever treated Dick really fair.

Well, some of that friendship had been paid back with interest. Dick

felt fine about that. It was something wonderful in a life otherwise pretty lousy. It was payment for services rendered, or a sacrament—like they said at the orphanage—to a faith: the only faith he had ever had. Only he wished it had been a better fire. He had thought that paper and stuff would burn good, but it had only flared a little and then smoldered and smoked. He had tried to spread it, but the smoke had frightened him. Finally it had got going of its own accord, but hadn't been worth a damn even then; the whole creamery should have gone, not just part of the roof. Still, it had cost three thousand to fix, which was fair quits for a guy who had barely had three dollars in his pants most of the time!

Maybe he should have set fire to the barns; the hay would have roared up there, and the firemen couldn't ever have got it out. But even in his red hate Dick had remembered the animals . . .

Funny about that night and the way he had felt—the lurid red flashes bursting inside him like fire itself—sullen, glowing, wild. It had felt good! So good that the depression and bitterness had vanished, and he had laughed and laughed and laughed.

Pratt came up on one elbow. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Huh? Me?"

"What you lying there laughing for? What's so funny?"

"Ah, you're crazy!" Dick said. "I wasn't."

### XIII

FROM the bedroom doorway, Sonia Goetz whispered, "Sleeping, Ben?"

"How could I be with you and Matlock talking down there?"

"Don't be grumpy. We kept our voices down."

"You certainly did!"

Absorbing statement and tone, Sonia ignored both. She came into the room without turning on the light and began to undress.

Ben growled: "Night after night, the two of you, whispering to each other downstairs. He might at least leave at a decent hour! He must know I'm waiting for you. . . . What were you talking about, anyway?"

"Barchi's visit the other night—principally."

"Thought you weren't interested in that. You barely mentioned it to me."

There was a brief gap before she said levelly: "I *was* touchy on the subject, Ben; I admit it. But now— Well, I'm amused, a little ashamed, and a little angry—but I can talk about it. That evening wasn't wasted, you know. I discovered your friend Lew is cleverer—and more sophisticated—than I'd imagined. I expected to twist him around my finger, but he saw right through flattery, appeals for sympathy, every trick I tried. That may not be much, and it was all rather nasty; but it helped. I'll know what not to try next Tuesday night. You asked him, didn't you, Ben? You apologized for me and insisted he come back for a *pleasant* evening, didn't you?"

"Yes," Ben said, "but why change the subject? You and Clint weren't talking about Barchi all this time."

"No. About lots of things: the farm; producers; daylight delivery; persuading Ed to put in a lab. Oh, a hundred things!"

"In which you aren't a bit interested."

This time it was an electric silence. Finally she asked, "Then *why* do you think I spent the evening discussing them?"

He made no answer, and the gap was hostile. She moved about, undressing, then put on a wrapper and started for the door.

He asked irritably, "What now?"

"I'm going to take a bath."

"No! Come here. We can't go on like this, Sonia."

"Like what?"

"Like we are. We've grown apart. I—I suppose it's my fault. I know I'm not much. You're disappointed in me, tired of a failure. But what can I do? A man's only what he is. He can't change."

"Can't he?"

"People don't." And in the face of silence: "Not people like me."

"If you're through, I'll take my bath."

"Damn it, Sonia— Damn you!"

"Ben!"

"You won't listen. You won't help. You won't see my side at all. Oh, I could—I could—"

"Go on. Strike me, if it makes you feel any better."

His breathing was audible in the darkness, heavy and choking. Presently Sonia turned and left the room.

Ben listened to the water running in the tub and felt the fever of slow, sullen resentment. She made him feel a worm so easily. He had tried again and again to change; he had worked himself into a stupor day

after day, trying. But what he had said was true: people didn't change. You had it or you didn't, and he didn't.

That crack about striking her— God knew he was tempted to sometimes when his resentment mushroomed into flaming passion; but he was the kind to go out of his way to avoid violence with men, and would never be guilty of bullying a woman, particularly one as fragile as he took Sonia to be. That he was tempted at all was odd, for there had been a time when he had never known the savagery of passion. Not till long after his marriage, he thought, had he known what real love and real hate could be.

Sonia came back quietly and without turning on the lights. Perhaps she was hoping he was asleep and would stay so. As she opened the window, he felt the wet dampness of fog and rain creep in.

"Hon—"

But she cried, "Don't touch me!" so sharply that his extended hand jerked back.

"Sonia honey! . . . What's wrong? Aw, I'm sorry if I made you mad—"

"I'm tired, Ben. Let's not discuss it."

"I thought we ought to talk, that's all. I thought— I wanted to take the blame. I know it's my fault we—"

"Stop harping on it, can't you!" Then contritely: "Just leave me alone, Ben: I'll be all right. But keep on, and I'll cry."

"Good Lord, hon, what for? Why?"

"Oh-h, if you don't know—"

"You're sick, hon."

"I'm not."

"You act like it: nervous and unreasonable—"

"It's just you, Ben. You shout at me, accuse me of—of things."

"Accuse you? Of what? I haven't—"

"You said Clint and I were—were— You said I talked to him about things I wasn't interested in, and if that doesn't mean—"

"Oh, for God's sake!"

"Isn't that what you meant?"

"I don't know. All I know is, we've grown apart. It started way back—before you met Clint. Before you met Thomas almost—"

"Who?"

"You two were together a lot once, and there was talk—"

"But that's silly! Ed and I— Why, it's idiotic!"



"I know that, but I wanted to hear you say it. I know you wouldn't lie. Anyway I knew all along there was—there was nothing—"

"Did you?" she said, on an odd note. "Ben, sometimes I could—"

"But even if there had been I couldn't blame you, hon, knowing what I am and how you feel about me."

It was not the accusation or anything he had actually said. Rather it was the accumulated bitterness of months of petty squabbling. Sonia's voice trembled suddenly with cold fury: "Ben, I'm a little tired of your not blaming me. That, and the rest of your—your self-pity. I'm not sorry for you and never have been: I'm disappointed—and about fed up. I'm disgusted with myself for dreaming there was more to you than showed on the surface, and with you for not making my dream live. As for lying to you, I've done it a hundred times!"

He came sharply to one elbow. "What do you mean by that?"

"Anything you care to make it mean, Ben."

"But not— It isn't possible—" He sounded choked. "I have to know where I stand, Sonia. I have to!"

"You'd like to know if your suspicions are justified?"

After a gap, he said, "Yes."

"And what if they are?"

"By God!" The two words flashed, but there was nothing to follow them; and she sensed his anger draining away. He asked in a muffled whisper: "What do you want me to do, then? Let you go?"

She despised him for believing what he did, for bowing to it spinelessly, yet knew that in setting aside his own dreams, he was doing something fine. Out of conflicting emotions came rage. She struck at him, a blind blow that caught him unawares in the darkness and jerked a startled cry from his lips.

"You're right, Ben. We can't stand this much longer—either of us. Perhaps we'd better say goodbye. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not. You know it's not."

The irrevocable words were not spoken, but the quarrel left its scar. There would be other quarrels, and next time Ben might not stop short; the inevitability of it was something both yearned to fight, yet neither seemed capable of the apology or retreat necessary to patch things up. They were coolly civil at breakfast Monday and frigidly silent after Ben came home from work in the evening; and with each hour the gap between them grew, and the chance of bridging it lessened.

The emotional tension led Sonia to forget that Barchi had been asked for Tuesday evening until it was too late to do anything about it. She was disgusted. Meeting him had seemed important. The fact that her dinner had been a fiasco was a challenge; his surprising sophistication and his clever insight into all her subtleties, had shamed her into a determination to reestimate her antagonist and try again, to turn defeat into victory. Barchi's background and personality were still of vital importance to the dairy's future; and if she had embarked on the project of uncovering them a shade casually before, the humiliation of a setback had solidified her purpose.

Her quarrel with Ben, however, had made all this seem remote and unimportant, and possibly the last person she would have chosen to talk to now was Lew Barchi. Still, he was coming. What was more, Ben, with masculine cowardice, had ducked out after supper so that, again, she must face him alone. The defection added anger to her heartache, and she was not in a pleasant mood when, at eight, the route man arrived.

His hat and shoulders were covered with snow. "Yeah, it's at it hard," he said. "First real storm of the winter. I'm glad I'm off tomorrow. Where's Ben?"

Sonia held her head high. "He was called out." Then, taking all the bitter at a gulp, she rushed on to apologize for their other meeting. "I behaved miserably," she said. "I wanted so much to discover all your plans—and you wouldn't cooperate! Still, I shouldn't have lost my temper— Tonight we'll discuss anything but labor and management—won't we? Then we'll have no excuse to quarrel again."

"We both said things we shouldn't have," Barchi agreed. "Skip it."

She would have given anything to escape this, but there was no way. What could they possibly say to each other all evening? "What shall we talk about then?" she asked vaguely. "Suppose you tell me about yourself. For a key man at the dairy, you're something of a mystery."

Barchi made a face. "What'd you want to know—what a holy terror I was as a kid?" He grinned ironically. "I was nasty. I used to frighten little girls; scared more to the block than any boy my size. My soul was harmless—see?—but my puss—" He shook his head.

Still suspicious, she thought, still evasive. She said, "You can be so delightful when you want to be!" and then, finding nothing to add as the pause lengthened: "Can't I get you a drink? We've no apple, but if you could stand rye—"

"Rye! I could stand it easy—if you'd join me."

"It'll do me good," she said, and meant it.

In the kitchen, mixing highballs, she decided what to do. She would ask questions, personal questions, questions that would make Barchi wriggle. She would take out her mood on him, revenging herself not only for what he had done, but for what Ben had done.

Back in the living room, when they had sampled their drinks, she began it. "Tell me, have you lived in town all your life?"

He cocked an eye at her. "I visited the suburbs once in a while."

"But were you born here?" It was a relief to be direct. She had done nothing with her tricks but make a fool of herself. This—at last!—would be different.

And indeed, he was able to find no evasive answer now. He nodded.

"Are your parents still living? . . . Are they in town too?"

His smile was real—and wry. "One of 'em is."

"Your father? . . . Your mother, then? You live with her?"

"Na-a-ah."

"Have you other relatives?" Her interest remained sprightly.

"The usual lot. Brothers, sisters, uncles, cousins, aunts."

"Do you live with any of them?"

"Nope. There's a lot of us, but we don't love each other." Flip as he was, he was squirming, she was pleased to notice.

"Where do you live, then?" Bluntness was producing the results which tricks had not, and she wished she could care.

"I have Room 510 at the Park View on Quigley Street." His mood changed. His voice became harsh, his eyes intent, and he leaned forward in his chair. "Don't look like that. Maybe I got no friends there, and maybe the doorman and the rest look down their noses at me, but it ain't so high-class I can't pay the rent! . . . If you want to know so much about me, chew that over." When, in the face of his violence and her own surprise, she found nothing to say, he added: "I'll tell you some-*thin'* more. I'm educated. I been to high school—not that two years at East End High is much. All it got me was a slow start in life, which is what education gets most people—"

"Oh, I don't know—"

"No? You been to college—so's Ben. O.K. So here's Chief Myhychyk, who didn't finish grades, an' me who's been to high a couple years, and you and Ben who got through a university—the lot of us workin' at the same job here at Weyland Meadows; and the Chief the youngest an' doin' all right! So much for colleges."

It hurt, as he had meant it to, striking at the basic breach between Ben

and herself, jolting the bitterness of their quarrel to the surface again. Tears stung her eyes, and she lifted her glass quickly.

Barchi said, "What's Ben making? One-sixty a month, about? Well, one-sixty's good pay for the Chief, and he knows it; but for a college guy ten-twelve years out, it don't seem so hot."

"Please!" How had they shifted so quickly from Barchi to Ben?

"All your education did was sour you on living like this. You'd like a better life, wouldn't you? Look at your furniture, your icebox out there. Ben tells us about the electric sewing machine he bought 'cause you like to make your own things, and about the washing machine and mangle you got downstairs. Well, the whole lot of it's half paid for, isn't it? Installments are making hash of Ben's pay check every month, aren't they? And if you got anything laid by at all, it'll go as down payment on a new car pretty soon. How 'bout it?"

"Can you talk—living at the Park View?"

"What college done for Ben was make him too good to be a milkman. He hates it. You're right: he should pull stakes and get out. Why don't he? Why don't he earn the kind of living he ought to?"

She asked with quiet fury: "Why don't you? You have the same kind of job in the same company—"

"Yeah, but I can sell milk and like to; I make forty a month more than Ben, and when I get fed up I can take out my grouch in ways Ben can't—if you know what I mean. Answer enough?"

"Oh, stop talking about it!"

Barchi said quietly: "It helps to talk sometimes. You're in love with the guy, aren't you? Only he's not in love with you."

She gasped. "What! Why, what—what do you— No, don't tell me!"

His brows lifted. "Forget I said it. What is wrong, then?"

"Wrong? Nothing!"

"Then where is he? You been jumping every time I said his name, and you don't know what you're sayin' half the time. Besides, you're drowning your sorrows in rye. Now what is it? A fight—or worse?"

It caught her unprepared. "How dare you ask me—"

"I like Ben, see? He's a good guy, even if he'll never set the world afire. Some guys are born like that—without the push or the spark, or whatever it is. They haven't got it, and there's no changing 'em." He settled back, and his tone lightened. He said reminiscently: "I knew a pair of sisters once had ideas about making over their husbands. They did, too: one of 'em pumped hers up twice life-size and made a big

politician of him; the other made a squirt of a pretty decent guy. . . . How y' doin' with Ben?"

Again he had hurt and confused her. She tried to joke: "Not so well, I guess . . ." But the words faltered. She felt bitter, and the yearning to mortify herself was unbearable. "Was it so wrong to try? I thought—there's a woman behind every success. Why shouldn't I try to drive the ne'er-do-well complacency out of Ben?" She stopped, an odd expression on her face. "You know, that complacency, that easy-going, awkward way of his, was what I loved once? It must have been! I'd known so many men who were pushers, who went hard after whatever they wanted, whether it was a job or a prize or a girl, that I was fed up with them; I was ready for someone inarticulate and self-effacing. Yet, the minute we were married, I tried to make him into the very pattern I'd disliked! Are people always like that?"

Barchi shook his head. "You probably didn't figure you were making a guy over; just adding something to him he didn't have."

"Perhaps. I loved him as he was, but wanted him to have ambition too. I pushed him into this dairy, you know. That was when we were hoping to marry and he was looking for work. He was prepared for nothing, had no idea what he wanted, so when I heard of this job I made him go after it. He didn't want to be a milkman; to him it's a comic job, hard as it is. People make fun of milkmen, and he's sensitive. But—you see—I didn't think his first job mattered; I never thought he'd stay here forever! I thought all he needed to get him going was responsibilities.

"I guess I'm the pushing kind myself. I've ambition, confidence. I've tried for what I wanted. I did well in college in lots of fields; I loved big jobs and authority. I'd have loved to go on working in our office here till I was indispensable. Oh, I did nicely—till it came to being a wife! . . . You laughed at my being interested in the farm, but you don't know me—"

Barchi said, "I was convinced before I left."

"I should have known Ben's plodding ways would annoy me. I did, of course, only I thought I could change him. God knows I tried!" She laughed in a brittle way, but sobered instantly. "It hasn't been funny. There's nothing more cruel than a woman bent on having her own way. What I've done to him has been shameful."

After the words were spoken, she paused to listen to them. Was it true? She had always believed she was working for the best.

She said slowly, "I was so subtle! I wanted him to believe me utterly

dependent on him, so I gave up my job, I hid my ability and confidence and played the clinging vine. After marrying him because he was no fighter, I turned around and cried for him to do battle for me like some primitive woman—and used every trick in the bag to make him. I've tried to rouse his jealousy; I've taunted him, tried—actually—to prick him to physical violence—hoping that if he'd beat me once it'd give him a taste for blood.”

“But Ben wouldn't.”

“So I found out. Oh, I've loved him for it—and despised him. It's odd, feeling like that: loving what I hate in him, hating what I love. Not surprising we've been unhappy? . . . And now I'm afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Oh—of his losing his job for one thing. That's strange when I still urge him baldly to quit; but I know inside that he's right—considering what he is. A bird in hand—You see, I know in my heart that if business sags, if a driver's ever laid off, Ben's the one who'd be missed least. That's why I worry about your agitating so—”

“Why not get yourself a job?”

“If I only could! But I've played weak and delicate till I've convinced him that I am. I've loaded him with responsibilities until I can't get them back. He's going to support me if it kills him! . . . Oh, how I'd love to take over! I've enough drive and ability for the two of us, but no—he won't hear of it. . . . I've thought of getting a job in spite of him, but that might kill what pride he has left, and we'd be no happier.”

“Prob'ly not,” Barchi admitted.

“The other answer would be children. If we could have a family, it might give him that extra incentive he needs. Yes, and take up my time and energy too. You can't know how I've wanted them! But I'm—not built that way. I can't.”

He asked, after a moment: “There might be a third way if kids are out, and changing Ben is out. . . . Why not just—stop trying?”

She stared at him.

“Take him on his own terms awhile. It won't get you dough or bring you to the top of the ladder; but it might give you peace—call it happiness, love, whatever you want.”

He did not understand what happened then. There was a tinkle of broken glass, and as he leapt to mop the spreading stain on the carpet Sonia flashed to her feet and past him and up the stairs. He knelt staring after her, his gray, ugly face blank with surprise. Later, when he had cleaned up the mess, he got his coat and hat and stood a moment at the

foot of the stairs, listening. He could hear her crying, and it made him frown. Presently he opened the door and went out. Outside, it was still snowing.

She was still crying, but more quietly, when Ben came home.

"Say! Say, what's wrong?" He came to sit on the bed. "Aw, hon, quit it now. What happened?"

She said half audibly: "Nothing that concerns you. Go to bed and leave me alone."

"What did Barchi do? What happened?"

"Nothing."

"But he must have. He wasn't—offensive or anything?" There was a note in his voice that she had heard infrequently before.

"Of course not! The ideal!" She thought: I could make him jealous.

Reaction had set in. She had wallowed morbidly in the confessional, she told herself, enjoying the sensual pleasure of self-immolation; she had deliberately painted herself worse than she was. No matter what she had said to Barchi, she had not been cruel; her methods with Ben had not been wrong.

Yet now, making him jealous seemed cheap and useless. She said: "Don't worry, Ben. He's—surprisingly nice, and—more of a gentleman than you might guess."

Actually she held him no grudge. It was the shock of realizing her own incredible behavior that had brought her flight; she was not one who ordinarily stripped her emotions before a stranger.

Ben said: "Something happened. Tell me or I'll ask him."

"Ben—you wouldn't!"

"I want to know," he mumbled.

"Do I have to beg on my knees? It wasn't anything personal—in the way you mean. Really! It was between us. Please—"

"Well—if you'll quit crying—"

"How can I promise? You can't cry or not, at will."

"Make your choice," he said. "I can't stand your crying when I don't know why you're doing it. It—hurts."

She was silent. He touched her shoulder. "Hon—please!"

Her response, as always, surprised him. With a childlike, scrabbling effort, she turned over and huddled in his arms.

The wound of their quarrel had at last scabbed over.

## XIV

THE farm paid on the 2nd, and when, as in December, this fell on a Monday, Petitt had a bad day, because Clint Matlock was busy with the dealers' bills and could not help; this, in turn, kept Ed Thomas in the office late to sign the pay roll. He was standing at the window behind Petitt's desk now, having just put his name to the drivers' checks, waiting for the general roll to be finished and looking down with quiet satisfaction at the ground broken for the new creamery. The long rectangle of ditch in which the forms for cement were almost ready made a stark pattern on the dirty-whiteness of half-melting snow. Earth from it, thrown inward for filling, lay in untidy piles, wet and ugly, but could not dampen the manager's swelling pride.

He said, "I wish we'd had a ground-breaking ceremony after all."

"A week ago you said it'd be pretentious," the bookkeeper muttered. He had just returned from taking the drivers their money in the other room.

"I was wrong. It would have been appropriate—right."

"It would have come too early in the morning!"

Ed grinned, for the contractor's crew, arriving at seven o'clock a week ago, had split into two groups, one slapping up a latrine while the other started digging. There had been no more ceremony than that.

"We should have done it, just the same. This is a turning point in the business, and it ought to have been recognized. It's our green light." No one spoke, and after a moment the manager went on reflectively: "Wycoff put this place into the black—or so close to it that we reached it on sheer momentum. I'll take no credit for that, nor for keeping things going at a time we might have drifted to a halt; but I do want credit for that out there." He drew a deep breath. "That's my contribution. It means there'll be no stopping now: we're a business, not a hobby. We can grow, and we have a future—the place, and those who work here as well. I'm proud of that."

Clint nodded, but there was a cynical smile on Petitt's lips.

The door opened, and Lew Barchi came in with the farm's green check in his hand. "See you a minute, Ed?"

Clint saw the manager's jaw sag and set, the prominent lips firm. "Come on inside. Who've you got with you?"

"Ben," Barchi said. "Come on in, Ben."

Gangling Ben followed the others into the inner office. Clint thought



he looked bewildered, heard him ask vaguely as the door closed, "What you want me for?"

Ed had guessed the reason for the call, but was surprised to see Ben. Lew must have tricked him in, he thought. He knew Barchi. Now there would be threats, loud talk, table pounding; he would hate it, but, no matter what happened, he must remember to say No!

"Sit down. . . . Bring that chair, Ben—"

Barchi said, "About those routes we had cut on us last June—"

Ben jumped. "Routes? What? Now wait a minute, Lew—"

Knowing he was dealing with one man, not two, revived Ed's confidence. He could deal with this—firmly.

Barchi waved his pay check. "This here's the last of my guarantee. Ben's got one like it, and they're the last this size we're likely to see in a coon's age. Our earnings ain't close to this."

"If you'd worked a little harder—" Noting the fleeting resentment on Ben Goetz's face, the manager stopped. He began to see that Ben's presence robbed him of arguments he might have used with the other driver alone.

Barchi looked amused. "You want facts. All right. Me, I ran 360 points a day last May. You cut me sixty-seven stops, so I av'aged about 250 points all summer. In September I jumped to 275 when people came back from vacations; but otherwise all I put on since June is ten customers. Now Ben, here—"

Ben said slowly: "I had 340 points and you took 100—my best customers too, the Zeiglers, the Danavans, and the rest—leaving me that Millville territory—" He stopped a second, tight-lipped. "People in Millville don't take vacations, so I didn't pick up much in September. Maybe I'm doing 250 now—and some of 'em don't pay so good."

Barchi said: "Those routes took us years to build up. We done it for ourselves, sure, but for the farm too. So what happens? We lose the routes and get a pay cut as well. Now that's a hell of a thing for a guy to work for. It's only Ben and me now; but in three months it'll be the Chief, and in time it'll be all of us. What good do you figure a system like that is doing? You're giving us a reason for loafing, but none for loving."

Ed said, "A good driver can put on 100 points in six months."

Barchi nodded. "Sure. Send a good salesman into a city, and he'll pick up plenty business in six months—but put in two routes, two salesmen, where one was, and it's twice as hard. Put in six—like you done when Roane joined— Well, it ain't as easy selling 100 points in a suburb as in a whole town."

The manager wriggled and said, "I know, but—"

"And each new route 'll make it tougher. So how'd it be if our guarantees got extended in proportion as our territory shrunk?"

"You'd like three years to get back this 100 points?"

"Why not?"

"We couldn't afford it!"

Ben said unexpectedly, "We drivers can't afford our cuts either."

"And, too," Barchi said, "as a guy's territory shrinks, it gets to be all one kind of people. Like Ben here—all he's got is Millville, which everybody knows is lousy, while Jake Larsen's got the River Heights suburb where the rich people live. Maybe you can't help that, but you could make allowances."

Ed Thomas was disconcerted as much by Barchi's incongruous and unexpected mildness as by his arguments. He said irritably, "Oh, 100 quarts isn't as easy to find as it once was, no—but you'd have come closer to making it if you'd tried a little. After all, there are still lots of people who don't take our milk. As long as other dairies have customers, an aggressive salesman can get them away."

Barchi said: "How? With a control board in the state, no dairy—if it plays fair—has a price advantage—"

"And in Millville," Ben said slowly, "some of the little companies chisel. To people down there a cent or two makes plenty difference."

"Try selling our quality," Ed said.

Lew Barchi snorted. "Our quality's bull. You know that as well as me. And maybe you think the customers don't! Selling's not easy any more."

"No," Ben said, "you can't go to a door cold and get anywhere, Ed. You have to hear from old customers about some neighbor who's dissatisfied before you can go to work. Sometimes you have to go back time after time, even then. Others'll change at the drop of a hat, of course; but they'll change away again as fast—or else they're bad pay."

There was silence when he stopped. After a moment he added: "All summer, after my route was cut, I was so sick about it I couldn't sell a thing. I couldn't even try."

Silence again. Barchi lay back. Ed sat with his head averted, staring out of the window, genuinely bothered over Ben. If it hadn't meant concessions for all the rest as well—

But Ben was Barchi's stalking horse, enlisted—the manager was not quite sure how—before his very eyes; and he was resolved to yield to no such trick. The whole interview had been baffling and unexpected.

He said finally: "I don't know that I can make you understand. The

problem's so involved with farm finances and plans for the future. . . . You see, a place has to grow, and our natural growth is through customers our route men find. When a route is full, what would you have us do? Stop? Stand still?"

"No," Barchi said, bluntly and surprisingly.

But Ed Thomas went on trying to explain. "We can't stand still. Only by growth can we earn enough to pay you men more, or cut your hours, or promise you security for the future. Can't you see that?"

"Sure. I'm not asking an end to route cutting—I never have!—only an end to the unfairness of it."

"Well, but—" The ground seemed to have shifted beneath the manager's feet.

"There oughta be ways: a longer guarantee, for one. Not three years; one year, maybe, to start with—till we find out what's fair—"

Ben said, "Even that'd help."

"Or you might try putting on salesmen to help a driver in the six months after his cut—then he'd feel the farm was backing him up, the rebuilding would go faster, he wouldn't lose so much pay—"

Ben cried: "Say, that's an idea. Why not?"

Ed said painfully, "I appreciate your suggestions and your reasonable attitude, boys—believe me! But you're not seeing the whole picture. . . . For instance, there's cost—"

Barchi said: "We're wasting time, Ben. You can tell nothing we say's gonna make any difference. We take our cut, call it just reward for our labors, and think of it no more. Have I got it straight, Ed?"

Ed Thomas was sweating. "I don't know that I'd put it that way—exactly."

Barchi smiled, for this was something he knew very well.

Clint Matlock did the monthly bills on Tuesday, and in due alphabetical course reached Zenith Restaurant. With the bill form in the machine and the name, address, and month typed in, he hesitated over the account.

"Whart, am I cockeyed? Didn't Zenith Lunch pay its October bill? They always pay, don't they? They always have since I've been here."

The bookkeeper looked up from his work. "I seem to remember their check."

"I don't have it. But my receipts checked with the cash book, and I've just finished typing the bills; so I know it's not posted to the wrong account."

Reaching for his ledgers, Wharton Pettitt muttered stiffly, "I suppose I could have misposted it to the wrong column."

"I'll go ask the driver if he remembers."

When Clint came back Pettitt was busy at the telephone, and the manager had drifted in and was listening to the conversation. The book-keeper was saying smoothly: "I was sure I remembered it. Has the canceled check been returned by the bank? . . . While you're looking it up, please check the indorsements too." He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "What did the truckman say?"

"That he didn't get any check from them."

"Wasn't it Dunty brought it in?"

"Moses, yes! Of course. One noon early in the month. He didn't know whether to give it to Carly or to you."

"M-m-m-m!" Pettitt fumbled in his drawer and brought out a sheaf of duplicate deposit slips. "The amount of the bill was—"

"Ninety-four-twenty-eight."

But the telephone interrupted. "Yes? . . . You have the canceled check? . . . And the indorsement? . . . I see. Well, as I said, I remembered the payment, but there's been some mix-up in the office. It sometimes happens. I'm very sorry. . . . Yes, of course you'll get credit!"

He cradled the telephone. "The check was dated the 5th; the bank indorsements, the 12th and 13th." He found the deposit slips between those dates and examined the adding machine tapes clipped to each. "I don't see it. I don't see anything in that amount." His voice became pettishly tart. "I don't understand it! I don't see how such a mistake could have been made!"

Ed Thomas cleared his throat. "If it has our indorsement, it certainly passed through our hands; there must be some record of it. Why not ask Carly if it was in the milk-route deposit?" He stepped to the door and called the checker from the drivers' room himself.

"Zenith Lunch?" Carly Groce repeated. "N-no. I remember Dunty's turning in their usual milk check; but an ice-cream check wouldn't come to me."

"It might have been cashed from your box, however."

"I don't remember it."

But the milk-route deposit slips, when examined, proved a check for \$94.28 had been deposited on the 12th from the collections of the 11th. Carly said doubtfully:

"It's the same amount, but how did an ice-cream check get in my box?"

It must have been cashed, because the collection is short in currency. But who—how—”

Petitt snapped, “Where’s the money, if that’s what happened?”

“Yes,” Ed said. “Exactly. Where is it?”

After an ugly moment in which they digested the question, Petitt said slowly:

“Now look here. I’m not sure what you mean, but before you say any more I fully realize that cash box was in my charge. If anything’s missing, naturally I’ll make it good.”

Ed cut in: “I meant no such thing, Whart: you know I didn’t! We’re not even sure that this listed check is—”

“Of course it is! Someone took it from my cash box, indorsed it with the stamp from my desk, and cashed it from Carly’s box. That’s perfectly clear, and it points to me; but—”

Carly cried: “How could it get cashed without my knowing it? That box is with me constantly, whenever there’s money in it! Never out of my sight—except when it’s in the safe in this office.”

The silence sparked and grew tense.

Thomas said: “Now wait. We’re all thinking too much. We’ll charge this off to profit and loss and be more careful in the future—”

“Oh, no!” Petitt said. “I’ll make it good. I’ll have no shadows on my record here!”

“I said we’d charge it off! Now let’s have no more talk.”

But the shadow was there in the office with the four of them and would not be dissipated entirely for days to come.

## XV

SUNDAY afternoons, the boarding house was largely deserted, and Mickey Pratt, drifting down from the barns after work, glanced into the dormitory, then into each of the smaller individual rooms down the hall, without finding anyone to talk to. At Vic Stewart’s, he paused irresolute; then, because there was nothing better to do, crossed to the window to look at the sunset which was building up beautifully in the western sky. After a minute, he drew up a chair, cocked his feet on the sill, and settled back to enjoy his weary solitude.

Vic, he decided, had it pretty soft, with a room of his own, privacy,

a sunset every night, and a grandstand view of the men building the new creamery.

Coming along fast, the creamery was. The foundation was in, a spidery skeleton of steelwork up, the lower courses of brickwork begun. Its size and simple rectangular shape were not too impressive, perhaps, but it stood for something.

It meant the old farm was growing. Yes, sir!

But, man! was it lucky the fire at the old plant had been no worse than it was! Otherwise the growing might have stopped short!

The fire must have shone right in this window that night, Mick thought. The light must have been strong enough to waken Vic before the alarm rang; that was why he had been first there and had dragged Hal Roane out of the storeroom—all because he had a room of his own!

Wasn't often fellas at the farm got their names in the paper.

And he had made a good thing of the rescue in other ways too, if you believed what they were saying about him and Bet! Not that he himself did, really, knowing from personal experience on what flimsy grounds the farm concocted stories. Besides, Hal's wife was having a baby, wasn't she?

He looked across to the Ellis house, but there was no sign of Freda. She still didn't show herself much, and you couldn't blame her; she had taken a rap, poor kid! He was sorry for her; but whenever he thought of that business it was to sweat and shiver with the realization of his own luck. If Swan had been a different kind of man, if he had been another Ida Heim—

Hell, he hadn't even thought of making a pass at the girl! She was only a kid, nice enough looking, pretty well built, but not grown up as Mary Heim, only a little older, was grown up.

Mickey grinned to himself, thinking of Mary and the time she had asked about the bulls. What a gag! Now there was a girl you got ideas about at first glance; one you could get into a hayloft, no doubt, on half an excuse. Not that he'd try; no, sir! Not as long as she had Ida for a mother.

Besides, he did more thinking than doing about that kind of thing. Probably most guys did, in spite of the talk that went on in the barns.

"Were you in the hall just now?"

Mickey jumped and whirled. "Jesus!" he said. "You trying to scare a guy to death? What's a matter, anyway?"

In the doorway, Dick Flemhos stood with his shoulders drawn up and his arms hanging dangerously loose. "I asked, Were you in the hall?"

"Hell, no!"

"Someone was—and I don't like being spied on."

"Oh, for the love of Pete! Ever since you came here, you accused guys of spying on you. What's the matter anyway? Why'd anyone do that?"

Dick tossed his head significantly. "Don't think I don't know how you watch everything I do. Yeah, and go through my things. I'm sick of it, see? Next one tries it will get his head bashed in. What you doing here anyway? It's not your room."

"I was watching the sunset."

Dick laughed baldly, flung into the hall, and disappeared.

Mickey stared after him uneasily. The boy was queer, maybe dangerous. Something about him made you think of hot, smoldering, banked fires. His sullenness was smoky, his eyes burned, his voice was always backed by hot emotion of some kind. You pictured him as molten inside, and wondered how a guy could live like that.

No wonder Charlie Dann had imagined him setting the creamery afire.

Dick must be lonely. All the time he had been here, he had never had any friend but Boo Fusek, and now Boo was gone. You had to make allowances for things like that.

Still, why should he think he was being spied on?

Well—it was late. Better change his clothes. . . . Should he eat here, or go in town to a restaurant for a change—with a movie after? There was a shooting picture on.

He went into the hall and for the second time in five minutes had the lights scared out of him. Dick leapt from a twilight-shadowed doorway, crying: "Caught you! Caught you that time, didn't I? Sneaking out to spy again, but I caught you!"

Mickey Pratt exploded violently, but Dick's shrillness topped and drowned him:

"Thought I was in the dormitory, and you were tiptoeing to see what I was doing. I saw you—"

"The hell I was!" Mick was furious, and his heart still pounded painfully with shock. "I was going in there to change, that's all."

Dick insisted, "I caught you redhanded, and I ain't gonna take it!"

Pushing past him into the dormitory, Mick began to peel off his uniform. But Dick kept shouting:

"You want to get something on me. You want an excuse to fire me, but it won't work. I'm doing my job and watching my step. You got nothing on me—and won't have."

"For Christ's sake, what are you talking about?"

"Charlie's got it in for me. He's tried to get me fired. Hasn't he? Hasn't he been to the office for that? Go on. Deny it!" Mickey could not do this, and Dick seized instantly on his hesitation. "I knew it! Well, listen to this. I can't get back at Charlie—he'd like to have me try, I guess—but I can at you, and I will!"

"Hey, look," Mick said, increasingly mild as the other's excitement swelled, "what gives? What goes on? You're not making sense!"

"I'm warning you. There are plenty of ways you can be hurt without its showing much. And I'll—I'll do it—if you don't quit meddling. I'll break your things. I'll drop manure in your milk. I'll cut holes in your clothes and burn 'em. I'll—I'll—" The excitement in Dick's voice sagged suddenly, and a look of terror crossed his face. "I'll—I'll bash your head in!" he shrieked suddenly, and repeated as though to command attention by sheer iteration: "You try to meddle, and I'll bash your head in! You remember that: I'll bash your head in!"

He ceased abruptly, stared anxiously at Mick, who stared back in puzzled amazement. Then he turned and ran.

Mickey Pratt slumped down on the bed and thought: What the hell? The guy must be a stark raving lunatic. But what had he said that he hadn't intended, there at the end?

He thought back over the torrent of tortured words and found them hard to remember. Only after puzzling quite a while did he begin to suspect the pattern . . .

And then he forgot the movies and decided to see Charlie Dann.

Dick Flemhos fled to the barns like a hurt animal to its burrow. At this hour there was no more deserted place on the farm, and, when crisis came, a boy who had been bred to loneliness needed to be alone.

There, in the hay-smelling blackness of the loft, with the sound of startled cattle drifting up from below, he gave himself over to frenzy, knowing he had walked into a trap and delivered himself to the hands of his enemies. He had let Pratt goad him into making threats that had betrayed him, so that now they knew and the struggle was lost.

In his dark imprisoned mind, he had no doubt of this; and, being what he was, he could not control the anguish, the condemnation, the sick feeling of defeat coming suddenly in the midst of a successful fight. His flight from the boarding house, his race for sanctuary and solitude here in the hay, was the first phase of it; the second was a violent, abysmal, humiliating explosion of pent-up passion that shook him as a dog shakes



a stick. He doubled his fist and struck blows at the yielding hay, at the board walls, at the rafters above him, never even feeling the pain of broken knuckles.

Yet the violence brought no relief. When exhaustion halted it his nerves stayed taut, and he still wanted to lash out in his misery and hurt someone.

He felt like crying, and could not.

Sweat was cold on his body, and, shivering, he hunched his arms about his knees to warm himself. A sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach added to his wretchedness; it was the hollow emptiness of disappointment and failure, oddly exaggerated, and becoming slowly, progressively worse over a prolonged period. Growing with it was an unbearable strain that filled his mind to the exclusion of thought. Once he wondered dully where he was, and why he felt so rotten; but for the most part there was only coldness, hollowness, and growing ferment.

He could feel the muscles all over his body tightening, and it seemed to him that he could feel each individual nerve stretching taut as well, humming with a thin, painful sound like the rasping of a violin gut. He wanted to lift his head and howl as it became increasingly worse. As though someone were tightening a tension bolt on each nerve, the pitch of their screaming rose toward the breaking point and became pure pain.

The cows downstairs awoke at the cry and moved uneasily. Some rose with a clatter of stanchions, and one bellowed in protest; the rest lifted their heads, listened, and, hearing no more, subsided.

But Dick lay stiffly in the hay, body arched, while the wried muscles labored silently against each other. Their contraction stifled his breathing, and desperate, breathless sounds came hoarsely from his throat. His lips were drawn back in a grin, and his sightless eyes stared helplessly into the blackness. For thirty or forty seconds, the constriction increased until it seemed as though bones must give or ligaments tear themselves loose.

Then convulsions arrived, and his body tossed with recurrent cramps which set trunk and limbs ajar in a silent, horrible, animal way that was like a chicken flopping about after decapitation. His fists clenched and relaxed, his writhing toes spread against the confining shoe leather, the gnashing jaw caught tongue in teeth and mangled it until blood stained the froth at the corners of his mouth.

This lasted three or four minutes and was followed by a coma from which he did not emerge until the boys came to work at midnight.

"So—what'll we do?" Mickey asked.

Charlie Dann looked at him with contempt, snorted, and finished off his second apple high. "Nothing. What is there to do? You want to go to Thomas?" He stopped to hiccough. "What good's that? What we got to tell him that I ain't been laughed at for telling him already? That he threatened to burn your clothes? Nuts! What does that prove? I know, and you know—finally. But Thomas? Na-a-ah! See him if you want. What the hell? Me—I'll have Flemhos cold, or I won't go back to the office at all."

"But what if he sets another fire, Charlie?"

"Let him! I'd like plenty to tell Ed, 'I told you so!'" If anything happens, it's his funeral." The barn man lifted his empty glass, looked at it, and rose unsteadily to his feet. On his way to the kitchen he paused to look back. "We won't let him, though. If you'll help me, we'll get rid of him before he can. He's on the lookout, but we'll find a way between us, eh, Mick? What about it?"

He waited for no answer, and Mickey Pratt was thankful. Trumping charges against Dick was a dirty trick, to put it mildly; but the boy was dangerous, and this made a dilemma for which Mickey had no immediate solution.

## XVI

Coming around the corner of the creamery, Sonia met Lew Barchi face to face and went hot with the self-consciousness of remembering their last meeting. Since there was no way of avoiding him, she forced a smile to her lips, and said brightly, "Hello."

He nodded, "Hi." Not until they had actually passed did he turn to add, "Uh—wait."

He was embarrassed. His lips formed words, and his hand made an awkward gesture; but neither was intelligible.

"For goodness' sake," she said, genuinely astonished. "What's got into you?"

He chuckled then. "This is crazy as hell, but look: tomorrow's my day off an'—How 'bout it? I thought I'd let you meet my family?"

"Well!" She was taken aback. "Really—I don't know. I—"

"Not interested?"

"Why should I be?" Wickedness gleamed briefly in his eyes, and she felt her anger rise. "No, thanks. I'll be busy tomorrow."

He was instantly serious. "I mean it, Mrs. Goetz. Honest—I want you to come, for two reasons. First, I owe you something—right? Second, it'll give your management-prejudiced mind something to chew on." The gleam returned. "Or are you afraid of that?"

"Of course not, but I see no reason—"

Her defensiveness made him chuckle again. He said, "I'll be around about nine in the morning."

She could not have said why she went. Her urgent curiosity about Lew Barchi was a thing of the past, and memory of that night when she had talked too freely still embarrassed her. Nevertheless, Sonia Goetz was ready Wednesday morning. He could, she decided bitterly, twist her around his finger and make her like it, and she was quite annoyed. . . .

"It's proper to start where I was born," Lew said, letting the car drift to a halt beside the great brick structure which was the city's pride in housing projects. He waved a hand. "This is about it."

"Here? Why, this place is new. The government built it just—"

"I'm talking about the slum that used to be here," Barchi said. "I was born in a third-floor, one-room flat on an air vent with a quack medico who lived next door for a doctor. Hell, the whole thing was a family joke! My old man was dead drunk and snoring, and they had to roll him out of bed to make room for ma; and my older brother and sister were playing on the floor, and some neighbor's kid wandered in in the middle and stayed to watch, solemn-faced, right to the end. Ma used to tell me about it and laugh."

Sonia said: "You were lucky to have any doctor at all. Why, one night over in Millville, Ben had to play obstetrician to—"

Barchi waved a hand. "I'd 've made a better story of it, only I'm telling you how it was—see?—without frills. Sure I was lucky. That's the whole point. Plenty guys are born worse off than me. Plenty! You might almost say too many."

Sonia said, "That's a cheap way to score points."

She told herself that the whole thing was cheap, and steeled herself to be unimpressed. Slums existed, and she did not approve of them; but their existence did not make the things she believed in wrong.

She clung to this thought while Barchi drove down Pound Street and turned into a warren of back alleys; but, when he drew the car to a halt

in a dingy, filthy tenement backwater, she was afraid. With his crippled leg, Lew seemed scant protection, and there was no policeman in blocks.

He merely jeered. "I gotta go in, say hello to ma and my uncle. You rather sit out here?"

She got down reluctantly, conscious that three men at a near-by corner had turned to watch with hooded eyes. A small grubby girl backed off, unfriendly though curious. Two boys stopped tossing a football to stare outright, and from behind windows all down the street the eyes of women took in her hair, her clothes, her manner. She could feel their hostility. She had deliberately worn a plain dress and an old coat; but their mere cleanliness and neatness made them conspicuous here, and those watching women hated her for them—would tear them off her, maul her, if they had half a chance. Sonia Goetz had rarely been so conscious of her advantages.

The building into which they went was dim. Dirt had collected in the corners of the hall; there was a heavy, greasy feeling to the stair rail, and the compound odors of stale cooking, garbage, sweat, sewage, and stale perfume was nauseous.

In a single small room on an upper floor, they found Lew's mother and uncle. Mrs. Barchi was very foreign, dark, heavy, with hair still black though her features had become lined, blotched, mustached. The uncle was repulsive—a blear-eyed, unshaven pipsqueak who, in spite of grizzled age, could not keep his eyes off Sonia's legs.

Back in the car, she said with intentional cruelty, "Considering your two hundred a month, Mr. Barchi, you must be proud of the way you take care of your mother."

He peered at her under lowered brows. "You mean I should get her a cute place in the country, uh? Hell, is that what you think she wants? What'd she do there? Away from her friends. No, she's always telling me that I—I—oughta move back with *her*—with my own kind!"

"But you could give her enough to fix up herself and her home—"

"Oh, me and my sister, we pay her bills, see? But we don't give her nothin' to spend. Unkie'd only get it and buy liquor. Then he'd beat her, prob'ly. He lives off her as it is. No, I don't give her no spending money. What I did give her—and I'm proud of it—is that big dressing table and mirror you saw. Ever since I was a kid she's wanted one of them. That's her speed, see? She don't want no home in the country."

Sonia knew he might be right at that. . . .

They drove for an hour in that part of town, while Lew Barchi stated facts. Here had been the alley for shinny, there—where the street was

broader—they had played baseball. The bridge and the rotting wharves below it had been their favorite playground and gymnasium: "God knows why we didn't break our necks. Better for some of us—and for the city—if we had." Here was the pool hall where they had loafed; there, the site of the old saloon where they had laughed at the drunks. Barchi sought and failed to find the water tower from which he had fallen, breaking a collar bone, but he pointed out the roof from which he had sneaked by an unlocked doorway to commit his first theft.

They stopped at a smoke-grimed, ugly brick school. "Hasn't changed," he said. "Neither have the kids—a tough bunch, then and now. Skip when they feel like it, raise hell, learn what little they have to. Come out with the reading and writing to be voters and some American history, so they'll know who the politicians mean when they wave the flag for Jefferson and Jackson. Yeah, and enough figuring to kick about deductions from their wages."

From time to time he pointed out places where he had lived, a dozen different ones. "We moved plenty, see? Couldn't pay the rent, or could afford a better one. Course this was our part of town; we didn't move out of it, but you could make a graph of our luck, tracing out the rent levels we had."

Shortly before noon they stopped at a hole in the wall housing some thin, earnest-looking girl clerks and some weaselly men. It was a Communist headquarters, and one of the men was Lew's brother, Ricky.

Ricky went to lunch with them and talked all the way through it. He had labeled Sonia Capitalist on sight and, almost before the introductions were over, had set out to convert her. The way he pounded the table and frothed at the mouth was reminiscent of Lew, but there was a difference of content. He talked philosophies, isms, theories—big stuff. He talked about governments and classes, world issues and internationalism, the evils of capitalism, rights of the people. He talked a jargon full of trite phrases and stenciled ideas.

Lew sat back and listened with a mocking expression but, when they had dropped Ricky again, said: "Maybe you figure we Barchis are all alike, huh? But me, I don't go for that stuff. Sure, the world's a mess, but so's Weyland Meadows Dairy—and can we even fix that? Hell, trying to sell that line is like taking a forty-quart can onto a customer's porch instead of a nice quart bottle she can handle and see the cream line on. Got no personal appeal."

Sonia smiled. "Clint has always said you were no Communist, but, bottle or forty-quart can, it still tastes like the same milk to me."

He spent the first hour of the afternoon showing her the hot, steamy, noisy laundry where he had earned his first money; the corner where he had hawked newspapers, the bowling alley where he had set up pins. "That's the work!" he said. "If I could 've done that all my life—or been a bat boy at a ball park—Hell! I wouldn't be making trouble for Weyland Meadows—or anybody." They saw a foundry where he had spent two years, and went into the Democratic Club, where Lew was glad-handed like an old familiar. "Worked here longer'n anywhere else," he told her. "Should have stuck with it. Only it didn't look in the twenties like the Democrats had much future."

And they visited Barr-Johnson, the tool and die plant that was the city's chief industry, where he persuaded a foreman pal to take them onto the floor. "Worked here when I was twenty-one, twenty-two," he told her, "but you wouldn't know it was the same place. Just one little building then—handful of workers, all skilled. Me, I ran one of those drilling machines—only you wouldn't know them neither. They each got their own motor now, but they used to be hooked up through gears and belts and wheels to an overhead power shaft. It used to be a mess overhead!" He grimaced. "Yeah, I was in on the ground floor of a business that was going places. I might have been a big-money man today."

Later, driving by the precinct police station, he said with a jerk of his thumb: "Yeah, an' you could find my name on the blotter in there, two-three times. For 'disturbing the peace.' That meant suspicion of theft, see? Never proved nothing, but they gave me the works just the same."

They left the Pound Street section behind. On the city's outskirts Lew turned the car down a winding drive and stopped before an ivied brick building. Not until she was inside did Sonia realize it was part of the State Asylum. When she would have fled, Lew said: "No. Don't worry. I just want you to meet my father's sister. She's cracked, but she's quite a girl. I like her."

Sonia did not. Lew's aunt was a gaunt, spinsterish, forbidding lady with a roomful of dolls which she treated like living children, introducing them by name, lavishing endearments on them. She said confidently, "Dr. Nichols is their father, you know."

It was ugly, horrible. The quiet building, the dolls, the expression in the woman's eyes, made Sonia crawl. But as they started home, Lew said: "She needed a husband; then she'd have been all right. Guess all of us need someone. Well, all anyone can do for her now is give her that private room and make her comfortable. She's what they call paranoiac, dangerous, and that's pretty hopeless, I guess."

He drove down Quigley Street and asked her to his apartment for cocktails. "We'll be chaperoned," he added mockingly. Sonia, feeling she needed a drink, accepted, not without suspecting that Lew intended the Park View as climax, as contrast to everything she had seen so far.

The building was impressive, but actually not quite as impressive—nor as exclusive nor expensive—as she had remembered it or as Barchi obviously believed it. He said: "Sure, I'd be more comfortable living in a boarding house. It'd be cheaper, more friendly. But this means something to me, see?"

The chaperon he had promised proved to be his sister, Nella, a big blowzy, free-and-easy girl perhaps eight or ten years younger than he. She had a husky, friendly voice, but around the eyes she showed her age and her life—if Sonia guessed correctly.

Nella said: "I used your bar, Lew. Mixed some Martinis. Want to serve 'em?" And then, with a gesture: "I got ahead of him. He likes Manhattans better. . . . So you're Mrs. Goetz? He's talked about you plenty, and I guess he's been telling the truth. Did he give you the works about the family like he's been threatening?"

Sonia thought that described it.

"Ain't we a rotten lot, though? Not a damn one of us any good but him." And as Lew came back with shaker and glasses: "You take her to see Tippy, Lew? He's in town again. Came around trying to cadge a couple bucks. I sent him to look for Ricky."

"After giving him how much?"

"Oh—a dollar 'n' a half."

"All you had with you, I bet," Lew said. "You goddam fool!"

Nella said to Sonia: "Tippy used to be cute, so we're pushovers for him. He's our in-between brother."

Lew growled: "He's nuts. Wanders around tramping roads, riding freights. Never has a cent. Jesus, what a life!"

"Why should he work when he can live off us? . . . Oh, we're all screwy, Mrs. Goetz, one way or another."

"It's the fault of the system," Lew said.

Nella made a face. "There he goes! I tell him the system never held *him* down. *He's* doing all right!" Her gesture took in the apartment.

Lew crossed to the writing desk, took a slim book from a drawer, and brought it to Sonia. "Yeah, I'm doing all right!" He sat down in an armchair partially behind her.

Nella said: "Go on, look in it. He's only showing off."

It was a savings account book with seven thousand odd in it.

Nella grinned. "Ain't that somethin'? A Barchi with money in the bank! Oh, Lew's a throwback, I guess—and a long toss, too!—or else mama had a lapse. But don't go thinking he doesn't try to help the family. It's hard, see? They spend what you give 'em on the wrong things. Like Ricky. He spent Lew's dough on Communist pamphlets. It was me made Lew quit trying."

"You don't believe in Communism?"

"Me? I don't know what it's all about—except it wants to change things. Well—whatever we are, we Barchis—the trouble with us isn't the system. Lew's proved that."

Lew said, "Here's the pay-off, if you're interested."

Sonia turned. She could never afterward remember exactly what she saw, but she gathered that Barchi had rolled one trouser leg slightly above his knee. She had a nightmarish impression of a leg only half there, of muscles shorn away, of skin and flesh ridged and twisted. She looked hastily elsewhere, feeling faint and sick, but through her dizziness heard the man's harsh voice:

"I got that at Barr-Johnson. Remember about those power-shaft belts and gears? Well, one of them nipped my trousers as I went by once, and I got dragged in. No guards, no protection, see? In those days you watched yourself, or they took you to the hospital."

She said weakly: "It's horrible. With a leg as bad as that, Lew, how can you possibly be a route man? Walking all day, heaving cases—"

"I didn't walk for four-five years," Lew said. "They told me I never would. But then somebody give me a job thinking I was a war vet, and it tickled me. Maybe that got me over the shock of it. Anyway, in the next twelve years, before I came to the dairy, I learned to walk all right. After that, turning milkman guaranteed kill or cure. Hell, this leg's as strong as the other now. A little shorter, that's all. The limp's mostly habit."

But his accident had left other scars. "Sure I blamed the management. Business finally woke up that losing trained men that way didn't pay; but there were plenty accidents first and plenty poor suckers suffered. Sure we yelled for safety guards, some of us; but it's always the same: everything our kind gets from business has to be pried loose with a crow-bar. Yeah, but it's a job worth doing, that prying; it's a man's job!"

Clint said, "So he went into organizing because of his leg?"

"He wanted me to think so, anyway," Sonia said.



Clint Matlock had come over Thursday evening at her urgent request, and she had told him the whole story of her adventure.

"Certainly he built the day toward that climax. And a bad industrial accident might well rouse anyone to social consciousness—or personal revenge. After all, with all he's got—money, job, apartment—he hasn't had much fun out of life since it happened. No social life, no girls. I keep remembering what he said about his aunt. . . . But still— Well, when you analyze it, it's twenty years since that accident, and this is his first attempt at organizing; that's a fairly delayed reaction. He says he drifted for a long while, unable to find himself, and it could be—but . . ."

Clint shook his head in wondering amazement. "What I can't understand is what ever induced him to take you on such an expedition in the first place. After ducking all your questions till now."

"He was conceding me a worthless victory," Sonia said. "After proving he didn't have to tell me a thing, he told me everything. At the same time, he made a challenge of it. He gave me facts—a lot of them; I know more about his early life than I do about Ben's, which I shared; but—they're undigested facts. He wouldn't help me evaluate them—unless his climaxing it as he did was intended as such, and I'm suspicious. He never said, 'This is important, and that's incidental; this is a detail, while that made a profound impression.' He showed me places, people, things, but it's a jumble. It doesn't add up to—to Barchi . . . necessarily."

"The story's not too unusual," Clint said. "Others have endured the same or worse without developing as he has. It helps, yes; I understand him a little better, perhaps. Grant his background with its unstable temperament, low intelligence and morals, grant the poverty, vice, and filth which he hated, top it off with an accident blamable on business— Well, it could be the answer, and yet I know what you mean. It isn't—quite right. The key is missing—or hidden too well to find. Intentionally."

Sonia Goetz nodded. "He wants us to think it's the accident. Perhaps he believes so himself. But it doesn't answer the question: why did he take me on that trip? That, don't forget, is part of Lew Barchi too. At first I thought it was a bid for sympathy; but it wasn't that. I couldn't help feeling he was showing off all day, showing off in a perverse sort of way that insisted on the bad points instead of the good. It was a sort of bravado and isn't explained if the accident is the alpha and omega of his character. There's something missing."

"Whatever it is," Clint said, "I've a hunch we've been given some good tips for the future. I wonder if you read what I do into this—in regard to what we may expect from him in the future."

Sonia said: "Trouble. I haven't thought particularly about it, but I can answer without thinking. The man's sincere, absolutely and beyond doubt; and if so—it means trouble."

Clint merely nodded.

## XVII

"ALL you done since September," Chief Myhychyk said, "is sit around on your goddam—uh—" He glared at Bet Roane, whose presence was embarrassing him, then whirled on Barchi again, shouting: "I'm tired of it. I want action."

Hal said, "Maybe we got farther with the boys 'n you think."

Myhychyk ignored him. "What's eating you, chief? I thought you meant this—what you been talking about—being against the farm—"

Lew Barchi, lying on the sofa with his feet higher than his head, shrugged calmly. "Gimme time."

"Time!" The Chief flung out a wide-armed gesture that almost hit a vase of straw flowers. "Whaddaya want? For three months you been horsing around! Well, I'm sick of it."

"So what?" Hal Roane said while Barchi stared placidly at the ceiling.

"So what? So I'll cut loose and tell those—damn drivers— Oh, hell! I'll get 'em so excited they'll be striking in no time."

There was a flat, unsympathetic silence.

"Well, why not? How'll we get anywhere without striking? Don't tell *me* you're not planning to!"

Hal said, "Not till every goddam driver is as sore as you are."

"And how'll we get 'em sore? You never sore yourselves any more. You gone soft? You laid so low for fear of scaring people, you got scared yourselves? Look at Lew, lyin' with his feet up and a sappy grin on his puss—"

With a curious glance at the recumbent cripple, Hal growled, "Yeah—but leave him alone. He's doing all right."

"What's he doing? Not a—"

Barchi said: "I been working on Ben. Had him arguing on my side against Thomas even—which is progress. And I got Tom North talking for a salesman, ain't I? So gimme time. It ain't easy getting guys like Dunty and Larsen started. Dunty's shifty, see. He's the kind likes to wait, then jump at the last minute to the side he thinks 'll win."

Hal said, "He tried borrowing off either you suckers?"

"I lent him a buck the other day," the Chief said.

Barchi sniggered. "As for Larsen, he's a sorehead without the guts to stay sore. It takes time to get him to the sticking point. But we'll get there. We're building slow—"

"Damn if you ain't! An' I'm through! When we goina strike?"

"We aren't," Hal said.

"Then how'll we get anywhere? Jesus Christ—" The Chief broke off, glowering. "Damn it, I can't talk with women around. Hal—"

Hal said, "Get some beer, Bet."

And Barchi seized the diversion. "Hey—beer 'd go good."

"I—I'm sorry, Hal. I—don't think there is any."

Roane's eyes chilled. "Why not?"

"You drank the last can after work today—"

"'D you expect to serve a crowd on the one can I had this noon?"

Barchi said hastily: "Forget it! It don't make no difference."

"It does. There should be beer in the house when it's wanted."

Bet protested, "We had plenty last night, Hal, but you—you drank an awful lot; and I forgot to order more—"

"So I'm a drunkard," Hal said icily. "Well, what of it? It's still your job to keep me supplied. You forget to order beer, you forget to get a decent supper when I come home tired—"

"I'm *sorry* about supper, but I'd been cleaning. I didn't have time to plan. It isn't easy to make this place look nice, Hal—"

Roane stiffened. "I know it's small and cheap, but—"

"Hal! I didn't *mean* that."

"—if you thought you were marrying a big, swank apartment—"

"I don't want anything but this, Hal. Honest! I never expected to have this much: a whole house of my own. I love it! But it has to be cleaned like any other place— Oh, a man wouldn't understand!"

"Why not? I did my own cleaning for years—and kept beer in the icebox too. . . . When was it we bought that last case?"

Barchi sat up. "Hey, Chief! We gotta be going."

Bet cried, "Oh, no, please! I'm sorry about— Hal, don't let's—"

"You guys stay," Hal said. "Don't think I enjoy this, but I get fed up. I don't like stupidity—"

"Oh, Hal—"

"Or wastefulness! We bought that case just Monday, and where's it gone? I didn't drink it. We had no company. What do you do, sweet? Guzzle it all day while you're 'cleaning'?"

"I don't even like the stuff! You're the one who—"

"I haven't drunk a whole case this week. And I want to know who has. Maybe that guy Stewart—huh?"

"Hal, you can be just *lousy* sometimes."

Barchi said sharply: "Hey, wait! Shut up. Listen a minute."

"You keep your nose out of this—"

"No, listen! . . . Hear?"

There was the distant wail of a siren. "Fire engines?" Hal said. "What the hell of it?"

"It's turning into the County Road." Barchi got up and went to the door. The freezing air blew in, bringing the sound more clearly; it crescendoed as it approached—and passed. "No sign of a fire."

Myhychyk growled, "It's an ambulance. Tell by the sound."

Hal grunted skeptically. "Shut the door, Lew: you're freezing us."

"Hey, it's slowing down for the farm," Barchi said from the stoop outside. "It's turning in."

Bet caught her breath. "Oh, dear, something's happened!"

Hal joined Lew at the door. "Don't see any fire."

"It's an ambulance," Myhychyk insisted. "I'm telling you, chief: I could spot one a mile away."

Clint Matlock let himself into the office at a few minutes before eight and walked slowly to the manager's room to strip off coat and hat and hang them on the hooks inside. On his way back he paused to tear a page from the daily calendar, and stared gloomily at the new date: Saturday December 14. He had an impulse to ring the number with a red pencil.

He felt washed-out, loath to get to work, but presently, sighing, went in search of Carly Groce and the sales tickets. Carly was leafing them through to find the route and dealer requisitions, and Clint waited in silence.

Carly said, "You heard?"

"Um."

"Guess the less said the better, maybe?"

"Probably. Through with those?"

Back in the office, he sat staring at nothing with absent eyes.

At a quarter past eight, Wharton Pettitt arrived in high spirits, and Clint's look became wry. Sardonicly, he watched the bookkeeper hang up his coat, go to the safe, remove cash boxes and ledgers; and not until after Carly had come in for the route box and gone again, and Wharton had set himself to record yesterday's payments, did Clint tell him.

He said, "The North girl's gone to the hospital, Whart."

Petitt's hand, outstretched to the box, jerked, halted, and sank to the desk. He looked startled and then watchful. "So-o? What happened?"

"Influenza—they say."

"Oh!"—with a shading of relief.

"According to Ida Heim, she had a lingering cold. Wednesday or Thursday she went to bed with it, and yesterday had a fever. They called a doctor. Then suddenly, last night: ambulance and hospital."

"It's serious, then? It must be. They treat flu at home, don't they, otherwise? Quarantine or something?" After a few moments, Petitt stirred. "Well—flu . . ." He shrugged it off. "Probably exposed to it somewhere. It isn't like—some other things."

But there was a tight expression between his eyes; and as he got back to work he made his first entry in the wrong place and had to rub it out, muttering.

An acid quirk twitched Clint's mouth. He said, "It was something that was bound to happen, of course; so inevitably you wonder you didn't prophesy it. Because some things, you can't get away with."

Petitt looked up sharply, almost malevolently.

"Poetic justice, you know," Clint added.

There was no response. Petitt's look was sour.

Ed Thomas, arriving soon, looked put upon. "Oh, it's a light attack," he said irritably. "She's resting 'very comfortably' now, they say. The idea of carting her off to a hospital! Idiotic thing to do—frightened the parents to death—"

And the manager too, perhaps.

He moved toward the inner office sputtering, but hesitated in the doorway. "Whart, I wonder if we hadn't better—"

The sentence drifted off, but Petitt finished it: "Order a furnace?"

"Uh—yes. But I guess not. It would look—"

He did not say how it would look. There was no need to.

Sunday afternoon, Tom North begged an apologetic ride to town. "I hate to bother you, Bill—only Clare's got my car. She's been in all day. You know how mothers are."

"That's all right! Sure—hell." Bill Bevis, embarrassed, wanted to say he was delighted, wanted to say something sympathetic about Nancy, but the words were not there. His embarrassment increased as the drive began in deep silence. "The kid gettin' on a' right?"

"Haven't heard since last night," Tom said. "I don't know. She was—uh—oh—" He shrugged vaguely. There was more silence.

Bill tried again. "I got one of my own. He's had flu, chicken pox, measles, everything, I guess. He had fun staying out of school, but me, I sweated blood every time. Guess that's how it goes."

"Yeah," Tom said.

"Uh—look! I was taking the wife to New York tomorrow Christmas shopping, but if—uh—if you have to stay at the hospital or anything—I'll—I'll work for you, see?" It didn't sound as he had intended, so he added earnestly: "I'd like to—honest! Be a good excuse to get out of going."

"Forget it. Your wife 'd—"

"Aw, I'd smack her down. I mean it, Tom." The car threaded the Sunday traffic slowly. "Lot of flu this winter. Read about it in the papers. Your kid must have it kind of bad—I mean, their taking her to the hospital and all—"

"That's because the house was cold—the doctor said. He said she ought to 've been out long before. He said she was too healthy to 've caught this light flu except—"

"Yeah, I heard about your place." There was silence, then Bill muttered, half audibly: "The damned farm. Guess you're like me. I hear 'em grouse, but always figure they're just talking. Guess you have to live on the place before—"

"Yeah." Tom sounded sullen.

"If I was you, I'd have it out with Ed Thomas straight."

Tom North shrugged. "Wouldn't do any good. I raised hell for three months steady, and it didn't. Nah, I'm through. The rest can go on hoping, but not me. I'll get out as soon as—" He stopped.

"Little more hell-raising can't hurt."

Tom made a face. "What's the use? How would it help Nancy?"

The relief man rubbed his neck. "I suppose it wouldn't, but—guess most guys wouldn't look at it quite that way."

The farm as a whole was slow on the uptake, Clint Matlock thought. Perhaps the epidemic scare accounted for it, helping to get talk off on the wrong foot.

Ida Heim was disgusted. "Epidemic! Edie Groce is having absolute hysterics because Virginia's been playing with Nancy so much. Honestly! What if she has? What can Edie do? Either the child gets it or she doesn't. As for the others— Well, the whole female population of

this place is terrified. I never saw grown women so childishly frightened."

Her husband said mildly: "Flu can be serious. Remember the epidemic back during the war. It killed a lot of people. And not just children."

"Well, if there is one, and a lot of us have to go to the hospital, we may be thankful that somebody had a sensible thought." It was Ida herself who had her teeth into an idea: "I say that, if that house was so cold Nancy had to be sent out of it, then the farm should pay for the hospitalization."

Eunice giggled. "Then if there was an epidemic and we all went we could all collect?"

"It'd be only fair, wouldn't it—if it's their fault we can't be treated decently, properly, and cheaply at home?"

Mary said: "I was talking with Roxy Dann. She thinks that cold house is the one and only reason Nancy's sick."

It was incredible to Clint that Ida Heim, of all people, should not have leapt to this conclusion long since, but even now she said only: "Roxy's a fool. Influenza is a contagious disease. The child picked it up at kindergarten or in a shopping crowd somewhere."

Clint sighed. Ida was having no truck with any other woman's theory, but of course it was merely a matter of time before the thought recurred to her as her own. And then? He could not guess, could not say surely that the farm would not submit sullenly, hopelessly as it always had; but there was about the whole stupid affair a potential explosiveness that he dreaded seeing detonated even while suspecting that a certain amount of destruction might be justified and to the good: and, judging from his own reactions, once people realized the truth, they might be capable of anything.

Once they realized it. And why hadn't they already?

Slow on the uptake, he thought again. For once. Perhaps an involuntary feeling of guilt had boosted the office force to its quick fear of being blamed.

At any rate, every hour gained before the reckoning was welcome. There would not be too many.

Later that evening Sonia Goetz stopped at the Heims' on her way home from the hospital, where she had spent the afternoon with Clare North. She stayed only briefly. Ida was avid for all the ugly hospital details; but Sonia said only that Nan, while feverish and uncomfortable, was perhaps as well as could be expected, that Clare was wrought up as

any mother would be, that Tom was useless and in the way. Then she rose to go, and Clint offered to escort her home.

"This what you wanted?" he asked as they crossed the road. The unusualness of her calling at the Heims' had been hint enough.

He felt her nod, but she did not speak till they reached her porch. Then she sighed. "Someone from the office ought to know, Clint. I tried to find Ed Thomas, but he's out."

"Yes?"

"Nan's flu has either developed into pneumonia, or it was that all the time. I don't know which. The doctor said it had developed, but after the way he rushed her off to the hospital Friday— Anyway, that's what they're calling it now, and I judge they're treating her with this new serum; they've had some fine results with it—but I guess she's a pretty sick young lady. Pneumonia's nothing to fool with."

"No," Clint said. "I'm damned sorry to hear it."

Pneumonia, he thought. Even the farm would know the difference between that and influenza, and there would be little talk of contagion now.

The sands of respite were running out.

Bill Bevis came to work for Tom on Monday. "Holy God!" he said to Ihloff. "Look at it! Do a guy a favor an' take his route, get in bad with your wife over it—and maybe you think I ain't!—and what happens? An *ice* storm!" He chuckled in his high, tight way. "But what the hell! When a guy's kid's got pneumonia—"

"Huh? Influenza."

"They changed their minds."

"No kidding. That's good, huh? Jeez, I been sweating over this influenza stuff. My kid, see?" Barely two weeks before, Kenny Ihloff had become the proud parent of a son and heir, and he was already suffering the penalties of fatherhood. "Kids that age," he said solemnly if unintelligibly. "Jesus!"

"The hell it's good. Why d'ya think Tom ain't working?"

"Yeah? Bad, is it? What's it like? What you get it from?"

But an explanation was beyond Bill, and beyond Jake Larsen when Kenny asked him. Later, Hal Roane made a vague stab at it. "Pneumonia? Oh, it's like a cold—only worse. You don't have to worry, though. You don't get epidemics of it like you do flu, so your kid's safe."

"How yuh get it then?"

"Uh? Oh, getting—chilled, sort of. You know."



"Like a cold, huh? From drafts? being cold? that stuff?"

A distant look came over Hal's face, and he failed to answer.

Lew Barchi's reaction when he heard was a perfunctory scowl of distress; but Myhychyk looked thoughtful and, as soon as he could, drew the other aside. He said: "I got an idea, chief. Maybe we could twist this, huh? Make sumpthin' of it?"

"You'd rob the grave of your grandmother."

"What the hell's wrong? If we can figure an angle, it's our chance, ain't it? What harm 'll it do? It can't make the kid any worse, can it, if her daddy decides the farm's to blame for her being sick?"

Barchi said: "The day I start figuring angles on sick kids, I'll quit fighting the farm."

Chief Myhychyk snorted. "I guess you done that already! You gone soft, Lew. But me, I've sat around long enough. That's a warning."

The news spread slowly. The creamery gang heard it when they came to work, and Pop Haas carried it to the barns after delivering the morning's milk. Ed Thomas heard it from Larry Ochs, who waylaid him as he stepped gingerly from his car.

Ed said, "Oh, God damn it!" as though somebody had played him a particularly dirty trick; and, watching Larry shuffle across the icy drive on his way toward the garage and Red Walsh, wished acidly and unreasonably that he would fall and break his neck—there was human nature in the old royal custom of killing the bearer of bad news, particularly when you thought he smirked.

Later, from his office window, Ed saw Luella Walsh moving between Blanche Ochs's house and the Heims', her squat, dumpy body edging precariously across the ice, her stubby arms flailing to preserve balance, but determination in every step of her teetering progress.

Hal Roane offered to run his own route Tuesday so that Bill could work Tom's; but Tom himself, soaked and exhausted, dropped in late in the evening to thank him for the offer and refuse it.

"Then the kid's better? Good!"

But Tom North shook his head and shrugged. "She's no worse . . ."

"Then why be a fool? You won't want to be working if—"

"I got to. I— This is costing me plenty, Hal—hospital, doctors and all. I—I can't afford to be short any more days this month."

The result of this was that Ed Thomas was waiting on the platform when North came in late Tuesday afternoon. After asking for Nancy, he said fumblingly: "Tom—if I'd known you meant to work today, I—"

uh—I'd have tried to forestall it. There's no reason why you should. Suppose, until the child is—is safe, I arrange with the others—"

"Thanks, but I'd rather work myself."

"I know. Probably, under the circumstances, expense is a factor? Well, Hal and—and some of the boys have spoken to me. They want you to take a week off—two, if necessary—and have asked me not to dock you for the days short or pay them for theirs extra. In other words, they want to contribute—"

"I wouldn't want that," North said flatly.

"Neither would I. I merely want you to know how they feel. No, the farm'll gladly pay them for every extra day they work—as always. But you—you take as many days as you like, and don't worry about the expense. We'll fix that up."

He thought it a generous, friendly offer and was surprised when Tom straightened stiffly, his face dead white beneath its weather-beaten tan.

Lips thinning as he tried to keep his temper, the driver said tightly, "I guess you'd like to get out of it for that!" His voice was actually trembling. "No! I'm taking no favors from the farm—not now! You think if I do, it'll weaken my stand. You got a guilty conscience, Ed, or you wouldn't be trying this!"

"I didn't expect you to feel this way—"

"I guess not! You know damn well my girl wouldn't be in the hospital now if it wasn't for you, but—"

"Don't make statements you can't prove!" Ed said, and shot an anxious glance at Ihloff, who was listening open-mouthed.

"The doctor said in so many words: The reason she's sick is that cold house—and it wouldn't be cold if you'd put in the furnace that it should have had! You know it and I know it; and if the farm doesn't, it soon will! You're responsible, Ed, and if anything happens to that kid—"

He stopped short of a threat, but his face had a greenish tinge.

The manager said: "I'm sorry about this, Tom. I wasn't trying to buy you off; I was making a decent offer and expressing a decent sympathy. If you won't take them—"

"I won't!"

"—that's your affair!"

In spite of Tom's bitter reaction, Ed Thomas failed to foresee or gauge the depth and direction of the farm's resentment.

On Wednesday, Red Walsh was waiting for him at the office, and

though he had been regaling Clint and Petitt with his latest jokes he sobered once the door of the inner office had closed.

Ed said: "Well, what's wrong now? I know that expression."

"Oh-h, nothing's *wrong*— Just thought you might want to see me."

"Why? . . . See you about what?"

"Well—ordering a furnace—or something."

"Why should I?"

"There's talk. Some of the women got it in their heads—you know how they do—you know how women are— Well, they're worked up. Sore. I do' know—I thought if you put in a furnace quick it'd steal their steam—"

The manager yielded to the point of asking prices, but the figures Red quoted only made him wince and shake his head. Casting about for moral support when the garageman had gone, he called in Petitt and told him of the advice and estimate. The bookkeeper looked thoughtful and finally sighed.

"If you want my plain opinion, you'd better do it."

Ed was incredulous. "But it'd look—it'd be like admitting— And you advised against it before!"

"I'm flexible enough to change my mind." Petitt spoke stiffly, but the asperity with which he usually made such cracks was missing; he could change his mind, but it was a bitter process and robbed him—temporarily—of his ability to criticize.

"Have you changed it about the other houses too?"

"Hardly—unless it's advisable later. Right now, for once, people are less concerned with themselves than they are with the Norths. If you do right by Nell, they'll be satisfied."

It was something Ed would have liked to believe and, left to himself, he might have yielded; but the farm gave him no time. Before the morning was over he had had requests for furnaces from the Groces and the Ihloffs, both of whom were frightened for their children. People came, or so it seemed, in a steady stream; people with warnings, news, and advice, people afraid, excited, or curious. Curious, above all; everyone wanted to know what he intended doing.

He was impatient at first, then annoyed, then angry, for he still failed to appreciate how the dairy was taking this. If he had watched with less stubborn eyes, he might have guessed that Nancy had become a symbol and a focus for all grievances past and present. Petitt and Clint both suspected this, but Ed saw only another in a long series of complaints. If he was beginning to be a bit uneasy at bottom, he would not admit it.

The constant harping on the subject rankled, and inevitably his chin went into the air, and his voice shot up to an arrogant, commanding note that cut short all reference to the Norths, their furnace, or even the weather. He was fed up and ready to show it.

That evening after Freda and the boys had gone to bed, Swan Ellis lighted his pipe, his face as stonily impassive as ever. "Guess you're in trouble, uh?"

"Now don't start that. I've heard it from every blasted department head who's been to the office today. They say it with a gleam in their eyes as though I were some oft-warned adolescent who has got himself in a jam. Well, if I have, I've been in worse."

"You're in no mood to talk," Swan said. "I know that. But there's something you ought to know. Tonight. So you can do something if you need to. There'll be a delegation—female—at your office in the morning."

"Oh!" the manager said. "All right. Thanks for telling me."

Swan concentrated on his pipe. Ed Thomas fidgeted. The silence grew.

"The farm's sore at me, I guess."

"Bad luck, that kid coming down with what she did."

Ed thawed a little. "Guess you think I should give them their furnace. Don't you?"

Swan tamped his glowing ash gently. "I assume there has been good and sufficient reason for not giving it. There probably still is; but circumstances—or bad luck—sometimes modify the best of reasons."

"I honestly thought they were exaggerating how cold the place was. After all, Steve Ochs never complained much."

"He was used to the furnace, the tricks of plugging the drafts, all that. The Norths weren't."

"I suppose! . . . Their girl getting sick makes me feel guilty as hell. Still, to change now—"

Swan smoked in silence.

"You think I ought to, just the same."

"If I were you, I'd slip over to the office tonight and order a furnace by telegraph. Get ahead of that delegation."

Ed made a face. "I hate to yield to pressure."

"Maybe pressure's forcing you to a decision that isn't really yours. If it didn't exist, you'd have ordered that furnace already, wouldn't you?"

"I'm merely sticking by a decision made long ago."

"Sure it was right?"

"Yes." The manager was defiant.

The other's Indian face was unreadable as he knocked out his pipe.

The delegation had been waiting indignantly for a half-hour while Kate Cooper giggled over and over that she was scared. Most of them, Clint thought, were scared. Blanche Ochs fidgeted until Ida Heim snapped at her, "For heaven's sakes keep still!" and Roxy Dann repeated like a chant: "What are we going to do if he won't, Ida? Luella? Suppose he won't do anything. What are we going to do?" Edie Groce, Mrs. Vaccarelli, and Pat Ihloff were white but determined. Fear and determination made a bad mixture.

When the manager appeared—much later than usual—he seemed surprised to see them. "Well! You *all* waiting for me? . . . Singly, or together? . . . I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I didn't realize— You should have warned me you were coming."

He led them inside with great cordiality and trotted around, collecting chairs for them from the office and the drivers' room. When the door finally closed on milling confusion, Petitt said acidly, "Quite an act."

Through the partition came the sound of scraping chairs, then Ed Thomas's cheerful tones followed by Ida's harsher ones; but the fireworks were slow to start. The other women seemed tongue-tied, and only gradually did Edie Groce's flat accent, Luella Walsh's soft, dominating one join in. Slowly voices became louder, but the words remained indistinguishable.

Clint shrugged. "You can't tell much."

The bookkeeper said: "No; but Ed had that stubborn look. Still, with a bunch of women nagging— One's more than most of us can stand."

"There's safety in numbers. What can they do but talk?"

"There's also power in numbers, and I should hate to have them discover it. Those women could be scattered with the right handling; instead, Ed's giving them a common resentment, building up a licking for himself under the illusion that he's winning a victory! Tenacity may be a virtue, Matlock, and stubbornness have its place, but both can be misused."

Clint Matlock asked: "Is the question of humanity quite apart? Don't we care if the Norths are cold—if the houses fall down about our ears?"

"Frankly, no. Unless it makes for actual trouble."

"Hasn't it?"

Wharton Petitt shrugged. "In the ordinary course of events, that in

there should have taken years to develop—and in one we'll be able to meet and satisfy all their requests. This is just a bad break."

Clint drew a deep breath. "Whart, I've an idea. Is it true we'll have to buy a new boiler for the creamery?"

"Y-yes—eventually. By the end of next year, perhaps."

"Then why not central heating? Put in a larger boiler than was intended—pipe steam into every building on the place. Our extra cost in fuel could be made up by charging a nominal fee—"

"Wait a minute! A new boiler's a good year away—"

"But that means the present one has capacity to run the new creamery—at least temporarily. If so, it can also heat the houses until April when we move into the new creamery; and after that the houses won't need much heat anyway. Then, by next fall, there'd be the new boiler. It'd work out neatly."

Petitt said, "There are a hundred objections."

"The original cost—larger boiler, laying pipes, putting in radiator systems, everything—wouldn't be as much as the radiator systems plus nine or ten separate furnaces—"

"We're buying one furnace for the Norths—if we do that!"

"If you're fixing up all the houses in another year—as you said—there's no point in buying even one now."

Clint could get away with more than most where Wharton Petitt was concerned, because he was an exceptional assistant; but this time he knew before the words were out that he had gone too far. The book-keeper was not in the mood to take them.

A little later Sonia Goetz came in. Petitt said, "If you're looking for the Complaint Committee, it's inside."

"I wasn't. I hoped to see Ed, but it sounds like he's busy."

Clint asked, "You've been at the hospital? How's Nancy?"

"They have her in an oxygen tent."

Silence. Petitt said, "That doesn't sound so good."

"The doctor muttered something about a crisis tonight. I—I don't know: he hasn't said much, but I think he's worried."

"How are the parents?"

Petitt said, "How will they react when it's all over?"

Sonia hesitated. "Well, it won't be the Tom North we know who'll come back—whatever happens. . . . I'm here to urge Ed to put in that furnace. That's how I feel about it!"

The door opened a second time, and Lew Barchi put his head in. "Saw your car outside. How's the North girl?"

Sonia repeated what she had told the others.

Petitt said, "It plays right into your hand, doesn't it, Lew?"

Barchi grinned. "Hell, yes!" he said, disappearing.

Petitt scowled dourly after him, but Sonia said, "You know, I've an odd feeling he didn't mean that."

"Sweet innocent notion! Afraid you don't know him as I do."

She met Clint's eyes and smiled. "Maybe not," she said.

The women were closeted with the manager for an hour, and the chorus of voices became shriller and louder. There was no longer doubt how the discussion was going. In due course the clamor rose to a climax and subsided, and then at last the door from the inner office opened and the delegation erupted through it, still angry, but comparatively voiceless. Ed Thomas looked exhausted, and as the last of them disappeared down the stairs he dug out his handkerchief and mopped his face.

"No furnaces?" Petitt asked.

Thomas turned to him, and a humorless, cat-in-the-cream smile twitched his lips. "No furnaces," he said grimly, "—no furnaces at all."

There was a wicker lounge in the glassed-in convalescents' porch where Clare North spent those hours when she was not in the sickroom. She liked the lounge, which was springless, thinly cushioned, and not too long, because its discomforts helped appease some inner craving that made her want to suffer as her daughter was suffering.

She was not asleep, did not want to be, though she had no more than dozed at fitful intervals for days. (What was this? Wednesday? No—Thursday. Or rather Friday morning, almost a week since Nancy had been taken to the hospital.) She lay on her back with one arm shielding her eyes against the light that streamed in from the corridor through the open door. She was afraid to close it lest she miss some sound from the room down the hall where Nancy lay.

The silence of the building at this hour was profound, and those sounds which did obtrude merely emphasized it: the swift whisper of rubber-soled shoes and the rustle of starched white that brought the heart into the throat; the heavy door far down at the end of the wing which shut at intervals with a percussion felt rather than heard; worst of all, the whispered conversations that were so hard to locate in the echoing halls. But such sounds barely marred the surface of the acute, breathless quiet.

A crisis tonight, the doctor had hinted.

What a crisis would be, she had no idea; but she understood that it

meant the difference between life and death to Nancy. Even so, it had no meaning; Nancy was living flesh and blood, and it was impossible she should be anything else. It was impossible she could die. That could not happen.

Clare's heart rejected what her mind knew was on the very verge of happening. Disbelief and dread had lived simultaneously within her now for so long that the torn feeling of love and the sharp ache of worry were numbed into a dull pain which mingled weariness, hopelessness, and depression. She was beyond tears, and yet—

She thought, I'd simply tear apart inside if anything terrible happened, because down deep I don't expect it or believe it.

Waiting would be easier if there were something she could do.

"Later," they had said. "The child may need you badly then, and you must be rested and ready. You can't do anything now."

So here she was in the sun porch "resting," while Sonia Goetz took her place at Nancy's bedside. They had even implied that Sonia was better for the child because she did not fuss. Clare was grudgingly grateful for her. She was the one person who had done more than offer to help; though she barely knew the Norths, she had given them her time and strength unstintingly; she had been as quiet and unobtrusive as a steel girder, and as strong. Yes, Clare was grateful—but jealous too.

The worst of waiting was the things you remembered:

Nancy spraddled out asleep on a hot summer's day, clad only in a triangle of diaper, so tiny and relaxed and helpless that your heart turned over at the very sight of her . . .

Nancy discovering Tom's whiskers for the first time . . .

Nancy's tiny, baby hands on her breast at feeding time . . .

Nancy developing her odd, mature sedateness at an age that made it incongruous and funny . . .

Nancy . . . Nancy . . . Nancy . . .

Each memory called up its own emotion: pity, pride, amusement. The remembrance of doubt and yearning returned—of annoyance and tenderness, naughtiness and punishment. Some recollections brought a sense of shame, but not many; Clare had not lost her temper often nor been unjust. It was the little unimportant things that were poignant, real, heartbreaking, and she had the odd feeling that, no matter how Nancy's illness turned out, she could always be grateful to it for teaching her this. When the pain of reliving the past became too great she wrenched her mind back to the present; but for the most part it drifted



unhindered, and she took a certain perverse, bittersweet pleasure in the hurt of it.

What time was it?

She had no watch, and the night was still black; but it must be near dawn, though dawn was late these days.

She recalled another dawn in this same hospital, a spring dawn with a great calm full moon instead of blackness outside. She remembered quite clearly watching the moon from her bed and hating it for its cold, unmoved serenity as it looked on pain. And the pain, after all, had been a mere warning which had only sapped her courage. She could still feel the hopeless despair with which she had listened to the doctor: "I'm afraid you'll have to wait a little longer, Mrs. North; the youngster ~~seems~~ to have changed his mind." She had been frightened too. "There's—there's nothing—wrong, is there?" There had been nothing wrong; Nancy had arrived in her own sweet time, a full day later, though that had been a siege too. . . .

Footsteps jerked her back to awareness, and she sat up swiftly as someone turned in at the door and was silhouetted against the corridor light.

"Mrs. North?"

Her voice trembled in spite of herself. "Yes? You want me? There's nothing wrong, is there?"

"No," the doctor said. "In fact, there's been no change at all. I'm sorry, but we'll have to wait a little longer for the crisis. Another twenty-four hours, perhaps. Some cases are slow."

What an odd coincidence! she thought. A little longer. She asked: "Is there anything I can do? Anything at all?"

"No—unless it's to get some sleep. Mrs. Goetz is with the child."

What an odd coincidence! she kept thinking. A day more. This was Friday—twenty-four more hours . . .

The immensity of twenty-four more hours suddenly engulfed her, and she heard the doctor's voice calling from a very great distance for a nurse.

A factory whistle was blowing seven o'clock, and Tom North, pausing to listen on the steps outside the hospital, muttered, "Wonder if they're working Saturdays now—or if they're just blowing that from habit."

Clare did not answer. Her grip on his arm was like the dead weight of a tightened vise.

Tom drew the chill air into his lungs and searched the early-morning

overcast for signs of a break. "Not going to clear," he said. "Wish it would: the sun ought to be out."

They went down the steps slowly, reaching the sidewalk as a Weyland Meadows milk truck came cruising by. Tom chuckled. "Barchi."

The truck pulled to the curb, and Lew Barchi peered out at them, trying to read their faces. He asked, "The kid O.K.?"

Tom suddenly could not answer, but he nodded his head.

"Hey, that's swell!" Lew's eyes were very bright. After a silence he added: "Well, go on home, get some sleep. Don't worry about your route. We got everything under control. You go home and sleep forty-eight hours."

"Maybe I will."

Lew nodded. "Yeah. Well—so long."

Tom called, "Wait. I— Look, I don't know how to say this. There's been times I didn't agree with what you said about—about the farm—"

Lew fanned his fingers in a circular, protesting motion. "Take it easy. You'll say something you don't mean. Go home and sleep on it."

"I don't get it. I thought—"

"Gwan home."

"Christ! You've changed, Lew. You know that?"

"Uh-uh. People don't change," Lew Barchi said. "That's why you better keep still. You're tired, worked up, see? So long. See you Monday."

After he had pulled away, Tom shook his head. "Can't always tell, can you? Jeez, I thought he was waiting around purposely to put the bee on me—and it was just Nancy he wanted to know about. Ain't *that* something?"

## XVIII

CHRISTMAS was unseasonable, a day as bright, clear, and warm as early spring. To Freda Ellis, who had counted on the traditional atmosphere to rouse a holiday spirit utterly lacking in her this year, it was depressing. The past week, shopping for herself and for Swan, she had begun to hate the season anyway. Nothing in the stores had appealed; she had not wanted to give; had known that nothing she could possibly be given would touch the sick loneliness that had become a part of her.

Even the excitement of Christmas Eve and Ed Thomas's reading of

the "Carol" aloud had failed to bring a thrill; and filling the stockings after the boys were asleep, sneaking down the larger presents, and stacking them around the trimmed and lighted tree in the parlor was no fun. Even the candy she had made, the turkey in the icebox, the pies in the pantry, had failed to make the approaching day seem festive.

Now, awakened at gray dawn by the whispering of Kit and Carroll in the next room, and aware that there was not even a chill in the air or a rime of frost on the ground, she could summon none of the tingling anticipation of other years that had made the wait till seven o'clock intolerable. She actually dozed again before, promptly at the permitted hour, the first "Merry Christmas!" whoop went up. Lying wearily she listened to the noise as the boys scrambled out of bed and raced for Swan's room. Two minutes later, they were in hers, for no one could go downstairs before all were ready.

"Come on, it's after seven! Hurry up!"

"What's the matter, Freda? You were always first out. Come on!"

"Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas!"

Huddled beneath a hail of gleeful fists, fighting for possession of the bedclothes, Freda decided she was getting old; she was classed now among the reluctant elders who had to be dragged out. Nevertheless, when they deserted her for Ed Thomas, leaving her three-quarters out of bed with her head on the floor, she felt pleased with the roughhouse.

Presently, slim in dressing gown and slippers, her hair bright and disordered about her face, she joined Ed and Swan on the stairs.

And then down—following the kids instead of racing with them!

There was a pause of awe and excitement at the living-room doorway. "Oh, boy!" Carroll breathed, crouched and avid.

And Kit whooped: "I got my red auto! I got it. Look. Look, guys! You never had one of those, I bet! Oh, boy—I got it!"

In a moment he was tearing around the room in the crimson racer, to the peril of furniture, tree, and presents.

Willie howled: "Make him stop, dad! He can't have that yet. We don't get presents from the tree till after breakfast. We never do!"

Swan said, "You can all have one from there now—how's that?" The auto was one of the few major toys that Kit had ever been given that was not a hand-me-down from his brothers; and, in spite of precedent, Swan hadn't the heart to forbid it to him.

Willie spotted a hockey stick that was his and was satisfied. Swan started to say that it would be of little use before colder weather, but before he could finish, Willie was nimbly dodging defense men up the

center of the living room and had scored an imaginary goal that nearly ruined a floor lamp.

Carroll fared less well. Nothing was as obviously his, so he gambled on a wrapped-up parcel which proved, to his disgust, to be building blocks.

"Who gave me that?" he demanded scornfully. The card, of course, was lost, but he was peeved enough to search for it. "Oh, Aunt Emma! She would! She always thinks I'm a *kid*."

He wanted a second try, but Swan squelched him.

Freda slipped away in the excitement to start breakfast, returning when the table was set, and the coffee and cereal started, for the ceremony of the stockings. The whole family, boarder included, had hung socks on the mantel and all were stuffed. There were oranges, peppermint sticks, candy, nuts; other things as well: initialed handkerchiefs all around, a puck to go with Willie's hockey stick, a water-color set for Kit.

"Lookit!" Willie cried. "Freda played fair for once!" The size of feminine stockings had long been a sore point with the boys, but this year Freda, not caring, had hung up a knee-length sock.

She thought: Is this what they mean by growing up, not getting a kick out of Christmas any more? Her father and Ed Thomas, she noticed, were far more interested in the boys' gifts than in their own. So was she, and she hated it. A future of never wanting anything, never being excited about anything, was depressing, and she yearned for the dizzy whirl that Christmas had always been.

Far down in the tip of Carroll's stocking was a slim rectangle, the size of which he regarded sourly. "Guess I'm not getting *anything* I wanted," he muttered, and she could have slapped him. But then, as his expression altered to awed joy, she understood a little of his jealousy and disappointment, and the feeling passed. "Oh, gee!" he whispered. "Oh, boy—a watch! Oh, man!"

And presently there was breakfast, eaten in dressing gowns for this one morning of the year, an excited, noisy, unordinary meal with Kit riding races between courses and the other two arguing that he should be kept at the table. Afterward, the three were chased upstairs to dress and then outdoors to play while Freda cleaned up and started dinner. They were in again, ready for the next stage, before she herself had finished dressing. The chorus of "Come on, come on—whatcha waiting for?" annoyed her; they did not realize, of course, that she had worked while they played, but—

Let them wait! "I'm fixing my hair," she shouted at them.

"Aw, forget it!"

"Who's goina see you anyway?"

"Everybody's waitin', Freda. Come on. Go-osh!"

Kit played Santa Claus, distributing the presents, though Carroll argued vigorously that the job should be his.

Freda's was the first gift, and, knowing what the thin envelope was before it was in her hand, she felt something curl and shrink inside her. She would have laid it by to open later; but Swan's eyes were on her, so with clumsy fingers she tore the flap, glancing in at the check without taking it out. It was for twenty dollars.

"That's for a spree," Swan said quietly. "Get what you want, do what you like with it, only spend it."

She fumbled for his hand, squeezed it. "Thanks, dad! You're so—swell to me!" Let him think it was tears that made her turn her head away. He had meant to be affectionate and generous, but money was so impersonal. A package of hairpins would have pleased her more.

Still she shouldn't blame Swan for not picking out something personal, she decided, when she herself didn't know what she wanted.

Wrapping tissue blossomed cheerfully over the living room. Freda tried to keep track of the boys' presents and who had sent them, while her own stack grew slowly. Ed Thomas had given her silk stockings; the boys had got her the usual dime-store toilet articles: perfume, bath salts, soap; from relatives had come underwear, more stockings, a string of beads. None of the presents really meant anything.

The boys, on the other hand, were getting their hearts' desires. Carroll had the tool set he had begged for; Kit, a book on gardening and an agricultural experiment set for testing the effect of chemical foods on plants; Willie, new skates and a baseball glove. All three were thoroughly satisfied. So was Swan, quietly proud that he could give his children this kind of Christmas. Only Ed Thomas looked as out of it as Freda felt. He ought to have a wife, a home and children of his own, she thought, and was surprised at herself, for it was a grown-up thought.

It was easy to satisfy the young, she decided. Then you passed an invisible line, and suddenly people started giving you stockings, underwear, or just money because they no longer knew what you really wanted. And you no longer knew yourself.

She sighed, rose hastily, and went to the kitchen.

Much later, at a hectic moment, the front doorbell rang. She heard someone answer it, and a little later Swan drifted into the kitchen.

"When you get a couple minutes," he said, "come out to the other room. Something to see."

By the time she found a chance, the boys had gone outside again. The manager had gone over to the office, and Swan was alone. He pointed to a box on a chair. "Nother present for you."

"For me! From whom? Who brought it?"

"Sonia Goetz."

Freda frowned. "But we've never given each other presents! I wish she hadn't! . . . Anyway, you should have asked her in and called me so I could open it and thank her."

"She said not to give it to you till she'd gone."

"Oh, dear!"

Her reluctant fingers undid the cords around the brown wrapping. Underneath were white tissue and ribbon. And suddenly the shape of the box warned her; her knees went watery, and she sank onto the edge of the chair, clutching the box tightly in her hands.

"Well, go on," Swan said. "What's the matter?"

She could not go on. The pressure of her fingers was crimping the box, but she could not let go; her heart pounded, and she was filled with an apprehension there was no expressing.

"Here, you're breaking it! What's the matter? Give it to me."

Freda shook her head, trying to resist, but he took it from her and removed the lid. She could hardly breathe.

Swan handed her the white envelope on top and lifted out the dress with a peculiar expression. "A *party* dress," he said, and she could read his aghast thought.

With a catch in her voice, she whispered, "It's wonderful!"

It was more than a party dress. It was a long dress. An evening dress—and black! Black with a gold tracery of some kind and a low, V-cut neckline and a thin slip with yards of rustling skirt—wonderful rustling black net that sighed in Swan's hands as he held it up. There were little puffed sleeves and a tiny gold bow at each side of the neck, and it would absolutely demand a new sophisticated hair-do.

Freda was trembling with excitement and with fright.

"What's the note say?" Swan growled.

She opened it clumsily and, after reading it, handed it to him. "Freda dear," it read. "Ben and I are giving a New Year's Eve party, and we girls will dress whether our men do or not. I'm hoping you'll wear this to it. With love, Sonia."

Swan said, "That damn-fool woman—"

Freda found herself crying, and an urgent need seized her. She sobbed, "Give me that!" and raced blindly for the stairs, box and rusty dress crushed tight in her arms.

Whether she wore it to the party or not, she had to know how she looked in it now. She had to try it on.

Clint Matlock, having spent Christmas with his own family, returned to the Heims' at mid-evening to find few signs of festivity. Eunice was sprawled inelegantly on the sofa kicking her feet in the air; Adrian was listening to the carol-blating radio. It might have been any evening in the year, except for some small boxes piled neatly on a side table.

"Have a good time?" Ida asked.

"Very! All the youngsters and grandyoungsters were there, and the confusion was something. This is my loot—it's not as much as it looks." He hefted the suitcase he was carrying. "I hope your day was successful?"

"I hope so!" Ida's lips twisted. "The girls, of course, wouldn't say 'Thanks' for the United States Mint, if you gave it to them."

Eunice muttered sulkily: "After you've said 'Thanks' once of your own accord and twice under pressure, you wish you'd got nothing. Mother'd like us to get down on our knees and salaam three times—"

"I'd like some decent enthusiasm in return for the time, money, and thought spent on a gift. And pull down your skirts."

"I didn't hear you thanking daddy for his present."

"Eunice, don't talk back to me. Your father understands I appreciate what he gave me even though I would occasionally like something personal at Christmas instead of something for the house. It's the cost I object to. If there was one thing I did *not* need, it was an expensive vacuum cleaner."

"Oh, mother!"

"I spoke about your skirts, Eunice! I've kept this house as spick and span as cracks in the ceiling and broken plaster would permit—"

Adrian began, "Oh, damn it, Ida, I didn't mean that, and you know it! I thought a cleaner would save you time and strength—"

"And how about money? Or are we plutocrats who don't have to worry about that? I scrim to buy mere necessities and then—"

"But we can *afford* it. I meant to tell you—I've a surprise—"

Ida looked startled, then her face tightened. "So the farm *did* give you a Christmas bonus? You kept so quiet I'd begun to think it hadn't, even though everybody else has theirs!"

"Did they all get more than last year?"

"Yes!"—grimly. "And you?"

"Fifty—instead of last year's ten."

"Oh!" Ida was off balance for a second. "Well, it's a wonder! The men all got five instead of one, apparently, but I had a feeling the department heads—or you, anyway—might not have got all you deserve. Are you sure you've told me the truth?"

From his wallet Adrian took an envelope inscribed with "Merry Christmas!" and a sprig of holly, and passed it across. Ida inspected the check inside critically. "H'mp! Well—I suppose you have one too, Mr. Matlock? . . . For how much?"

"Ten."

Mrs. Heim stiffened. "When you've only been here six months? I suppose the office must take care of its own! How much did Wharton Pettitt take?"

"I don't know," Clint said, and was thankful.

"Swan Ellis," Eunice said sullenly, "got one-twenty-five."

Ida's lips sagged, for the feud between the Heims and Swan was of long standing. "How do you know?"

"Someone saw the check."

Adrian repeated, "One-twenty-five! Judas—H—Priest!"

"I don't believe it! What has Swan done to deserve that much?"

"Sucked around Thomas twenty-four hours a day!" Adrian muttered.

"But *that* much more— Mr. Matlock, you must know—"

"I'm sorry. I don't. Only three people know what the bonuses were: Melius, Pettitt, and Thomas." Clint did not mention that he also would know in the due course of bookkeeping.

"But you've heard them talk? . . . Why do they keep it so secret, anyway? . . . Perhaps Luella was right after all."

"In what?" Adrian asked.

"She had it from Red, and I don't know where he got it, but if it's true, there ought to be a very strong protest. She says Ed Thomas's own bonus was *nine hundred dollars*. Is that true, Mr. Matlock?"

Clint made a vague gesture to cover his inability to voice an immediate answer. Finally he said, sweating slightly: "I can only repeat, I don't know—and I don't think the Walshes do. But if it is, don't forget that Ed hasn't full discretion. Whatever his bonus, Melius must have approved it. It may be that he thinks Ed's success with the business during the past year was worth that much. I don't know."

"Worth it!" Ida said. "That's a joke the farm will love, on top of the



North affair. If there's even a *grain* of truth in this, it ought to make us boil."

On top of the North affair, Clint thought, Ed would have done well to keep scrupulously secret whatever bonus he had received, large or small.

Perhaps he had not told, though: malicious gossip like this could start with no basis at all. And that it was started, he had no doubt.

## XIX

"ANYBODY know of a decent flat for rent cheap?"

Jake Larsen, struggling into his windbreaker, said: "Don't make me laugh! With Barr-Johnson booming, ain't any rents cheap any more."

"Moving?" Hal asked, not looking up from his sheet.

Tom North shrugged. "I can't stay here. It's all right while the weather's like it's been since Christmas, but—"

Myhychyk said, "Is your kid home, chief? How's she?"

"Since Friday. She's still in bed. Time she's ready to get up, it'll be real cold—and our hope of a furnace is shot. I been lookin' for a rent in town, but the cheapest I seen is twice what I'm paying here. Hell, I can't afford that on top of hospital and doctor bills."

"They got ya in a hole," Hal Roane said.

"Yeah." Tom looked deliberately at Barchi, busy at the next table. "I been thinking—about the farm."

Feeling their eyes, Barchi looked up to say mildly: "Don't blame you. They really put you through something."

Tom frowned and saw that Hal and Chief Myhychyk were frowning too.

The Chief said: "I guess you're sore at the place, Tom. Well—"

"Leave him alone," Barchi grunted. "He's had a tough time. Don't ride him 'fore he's had a chance to think."

"Guy feels like that," the Chief said, "he's done his thinking! . . . Look, chief, we ain't organized—these two want to talk, see? Me, I'm tired of that. I want action, and if you feel the same—"

Tom said slowly: "I'm not sure I do—now, right off. I'm not sore. That's passed. I don't know if I can make you see—"

"You don't got to, chief, just so's you're with me."

But Tom did have to. "I figured this way: even if some things were wrong, the farm had offered us jobs on such-and-such terms which we accepted by taking the jobs. I figured we had no kick coming—"

"Oh, he-ell!" Hal said.

"That was how I felt. Now— Well, I was hot, see? I was ready to quit my job, but—" He shrugged. "How could I? I been here seven years. I'm older, I got a family; I couldn't start over again. So I began to wonder if a business didn't get an obligation towards its men, aside from the original terms of hiring, just from employing them a good while."

"You damn right it does!" the Chief said.

"It may be Thomas's business, but it's our living; we should have something to say about it, and he at least ought to listen. I don't mean just to me. What made me think about this was finding the women had called on him together and been turned down flat. That was different than turning me down. It was— One person's not important, but a whole bunch— Well, it hit me. Well, the way I feel—we ought to have someone to represent us. There ought to be a group to give our side to Ed, help him work things out—"

"And talk turkey to him if he gets stubborn," Myhychyk said.

"Well—maybe—"

Hal said, "Come over to the house, and let's talk awhile."

"All right."

"Lew?"

"Na-a-ah!"

Hal lingered as the Chief and Tom went downstairs. "What's the idea?" he asked. "Maybe it's smart, letting Tom and the Chief run after you—I wouldn't know. But why not let me in on it?"

Barchi said: "I don't care if they run after me or not. I'm fed up with the whole thing, that's all. Sick of it."

Cars were parked on two sides of the Goetzes', and the sound of radio music, voices, and laughter was clear and tinny in the country quiet. Swan Ellis drove onto the Heims' lawn, cut the motor, and sat listening in the chill, windless, star-filled night.

He said, "Perhaps we'd better go back home, uh?"

Freda had made no move to get out. From the profile outline of her head and hair, he knew she was staring ahead fixedly, and her shoulders under her evening cloak were hunched. After a moment, she whispered:

"Oh, gee, I'm scared! I wish I hadn't come."

"You don't have to go in."

She put a hand on his arm and squeezed it. He waited uncertainly and had almost decided to take her home when she added shakily: "If I sit here any longer, I'll lose my nerve. Come on."

Opening her door, she stepped down before he could help her, her dress whispering as she held it off the grass. Together they hurried across road and lawn toward the lighted porch.

Swan checked her there. "O.K.?"

"O.K."

"Then smile!"

She tried, realizing how set her face had been.

"You look a hell of a way from enjoying yourself, still!"

He was so rarely profane, her grimace became real.

"That's better!" And he opened the door.

Walking in, fighting a tight sickness, she thought: It'll be my luck to meet Ida or Luella first thing. If I do, and they say anything, I'll sink through the floor.

Noise struck them a physical blow. The party was well under way, the radio playing full force and everybody shrieking above it, the air heavy, hot, and unpleasant with the smell of alcohol, powder, and people. From the doorway they could see the men playing cards around the kitchen table under a haze of cigarette smoke, and to the right, through the arch, couples dancing in the half-light of the living room. It was so like another party that Freda was possessed of an impulse to turn and run. She searched apprehensively for the women she feared, but could not place them.

And then, trailed by a strange young man, Sonia came up, holding out both hands. "I'm so glad, Freda!" Her fingers gripped the girl's, conveying all she could not say. "Let me have your cloak: I want to see the dress." She held Freda at arms' length. "You've a smaller waist than I thought. It needs taking in. I had to guess at your sizes, making it."

"It's wonderful! Just as it is!" The girl's eyes shone, and the tight feeling began to relax. She swirled. "It makes such a *wonderful* sound."

"I like it and approve my own taste. Don't you, Swan?"

Swan said dourly, "It was too fine, too expensive a gift—"

"Oh, nonsense! The materials have been lying around the house for ages; I'd no use for them. And making it was fun—"

"It's pretty old for her. And black, for a young girl—"

"Black suits her blondness. Besides, her first black dress means more to a girl than coming of age. Look how she wears it!"

Freda felt better. The dress *was* wonderful, and she felt wonderful in

it. The low neck was pleasantly daring; the long molded lines of the slip flattered her slimness; the flaring skirt with its gold tracery talked as she moved, and gave her confidence.

Sonia said: "I'm glad you did your hair up and used color. You're perfect. . . . Oh, this is Max Mann, who came to the creamery when Steve left. Excuse me while I get rid of your things."

Max said, "Before the rush starts: how's about a dance?"

Close beside them, Ben said: "Hey, wait! You can have her in a minute. Right now I'm making drinks, and I gotta get her order. What'll you have, Freda? Apple, rye, gin?"

A little too hastily, Freda said, "Oh, nothing at all, please!"

"Everyone's drinking. You better too, in self-protection."

"No, thank you. Please. I mean it."

She swung away, comfortable with Max because he was a stranger: that would have been Sonia's idea, of course. But almost at once Donny Ochs came down the floor, passed them, suddenly circled, and came back to pry them gently apart and hold Freda out for inspection. Then he whistled.

"Maxey boy, go form a stag line. This is *my* dance."

Max said to her: "He's too big for me. Sorry. But I'll be back."

Freda felt stifled. Here it came, she thought. Donny had known all about last summer and was the kind to say something.

He said: "Lady, you've come out of retirement with a bang. Come on, let's show these dopes some dancing."

She was given a whirl. The dress was a huge success, and knowing she had never looked prettier lent wings to her feet. There were other remarks, but none of the sly, nasty kind that hurt; to the men, at least, the past was dead. Measure of her success was the acid way some of the other girls began looking at her. Once Mary Heim said oversweetly, "Stealing the show, aren't you, pet? You've learned some tricks—since last spring!"

Eunice, overhearing, cried: "Don't mind her, Freda! Mary's *tight*." But the remark had pleased rather than hurt, and the fact that it had, bolstered her belief that she could face out the real test when it came.

She had located Ida Heim, Blanche Ochs, Roxy Dann, Luella Walsh, and Kate Cooper, together in a small circle in the dining room. She thought, Maybe they'll stay there and never know I'm here. But this was a false hope; there was inevitability to meeting them, and in actuality she had made up her mind to it. Only, now that the moment was here,

she was afraid; was postponing it as long as possible by keeping out of their way.

Indeed the fear gradually dulled her first pleasure in the evening and the party. For Weyland Meadows, and for the Goetzes in particular, it was a surprising party anyway. Perhaps because it was New Year's Eve, perhaps because it was long since the last affair and relaxation was overdue, there were signs that the farm was working up to a binge. Chief evidence so far was the hilarity; but Freda found that dancing was becoming difficult too: Ben Goetz wanted to jig all the time; Manny Zapeto insisted on doing tango or rumba steps, no matter what the music called for; and several of the boys began to hold her closer than she liked.

For a while she forsook the floor to watch the poker game; but when Larry Ochs came along and draped an arm over her shoulders she welcomed Clint Matlock's invitation to dance again. Clint was nice. She remembered Mickey Pratt—he had been nice too—and wondered where he was; the other barn boys were all there. An instant later, she knew that Mickey's absence was Sonia's planning.

The kitchen developed an odd and shameful fascination as she discovered that Swan was high. This, she thought, was why he had never let her come to these parties. She was a little shocked because drink changed him; his impassiveness disappeared, and he chuckled a great deal in a half-suppressed way. He was winning at poker and having a completely good time.

As the evening wore on, Freda found herself restless and bored. Apprehension was a nagging ache, and the spirits of the party had progressed until she could not and did not want to keep up. With discomfort and shame she watched her elders making fools of themselves, watched youngsters only a little older than herself sitting in pairs in the darker corners of the living room. Embarrassed and shocked, she gradually withdrew from the general gayety, and in the end found herself lonely and forgotten on the party's outskirts.

She was sitting on the stairs, wishing that midnight and the New Year would come so that she could collect Swan and go home, when a voice spoke beside her. "I don't know if you know me—"

She turned, fighting a convulsive shudder. Something seemed to have closed her throat, and it was only by careful effort that she managed to say coolly: "Of course. You're Amos Vliet—aren't you?"

The odd, frightening reaction which a mere glimpse of the man could produce in her was distressing. It was his hardness, she thought. Touching him would be like touching iron.

"Yeah." He swung easily to a seat on the step below her. Remembering that other party, Freda moved away slightly when the puff of her sleeve brushed his suit.

"You must have just come," she said. "I haven't seen you before."

"Um. Quite a party, huh? Everyone on the ball."

"All except me, I guess." And then, because suddenly she did not wish him near her any longer: "Go to the kitchen, and Ben'll fix you something."

"Later, maybe, I'll have a beer if they got any. Too late to start getting stinko, so I'll stay sober and cart home the corpses."

Freda said: "I was stinko once. I never want to be again."

He looked at her, and she wondered, flushing, why she had said it. She thought: I made a fool of myself. What can I possibly say to him now? She found nothing to say, and the radio, Lew Barchi's harsh voice from the kitchen, Edie Groce's shrill tones calling for Clint, filled the silence.

"That's a nice dress," he said. "New?"

"Uh-huh. It's practically the first I ever had. Grown-up, I mean." And because that sounded silly, something made her add, "And this is my first grown-up party too—practically."

Again he looked at her, and she waited, chin high and defiant. He said merely: "You picked a pip. Guess you're not having much fun?"

"But I am. I've been having a grand time. I've been dancing with everyone, only I'm tired."

"Like to dance, do you? O.K. Come on."

"Oh, but—" She hesitated, oddly afraid, and when she finally stood up she was trembling slightly. I oughtn't to dance, she thought; something'll happen. Walking to the living room with him, she was filled with a tremendous anticipation; yet, when he was actually holding her, there was, at first, nothing to justify it. It was no different from dancing with anyone else, and Amos was not even particularly good. But then, slowly, something did happen. She became conscious of the dance, of Amos and of herself, to the gradual exclusion of all else, and the party blanked out; she lost even the music save for its throbbing beat. It seemed to her that she and Amos were whirling in the dark infinity of space with no one near them. It was a wonderful sensation, and she lent herself to it happily.

And in due course a swirl of the crowd brought them to the threshold of the dining room . . .

Distantly, Freda heard a voice. "Well, if it isn't Freda Ellis!"

Amos stopped, and the girl's self-induced hypnosis was shattered. They were there before her startled eyes, the lot of them, the farm women she had hated and feared, and their faces wore the incredulously surprised look of wolves stumbling unexpectedly upon a lamb.

Freda's head swam, the room whirled and darkened around its edges. She felt Amos's arm, a hard band about her waist, steadying her, holding her up, and she fought the faintness desperately. For a horrible moment, she felt ill; but then Ida Heim's voice came again, and it was like cold water thrown over her:

"Well! Again, Freda? Really!"

"No," Freda said. "No, I'm not. Don't you dare think that."

Luella Walsh said softly: "How disgusting of Sonia to give such a party! She should be ashamed. These youngsters are making sights of themselves."

"I should have thought, Freda," Mrs. Heim added, "that you'd have learned your lesson last time. It doesn't look like it. Believe me, if I were Swan, I'd teach it to you in a way you wouldn't forget."

Blanche Ochs said, "You mean Freda's drunk—again?" Blanche was always two minutes behind any conversation.

Mrs. Cooper giggled. "What did you think she was? You saw her stagger, didn't you? She can't even stand up."

Freda cried: "That's not true. I was dizzy. I haven't had a drink all evening. Ask Ben. Ask anyone. Prove it any way you like."

Ida said, "We have eyes."

Freda thought, I wonder if she knows the state Mary's in? Does she know that even Eunice is sneaking drinks out of other people's glasses? She doesn't, of course. I could shut her up by telling her what her own daughters are doing. I could shut her up good!

But that would only get Mary and Eunice in trouble.

Thinking of other people steadied her.

She thought, This is it. This is what I've been waiting for. I can't run now. Remember: I decided to face it out.

And she thought wildly: Oh, why does Amos have to be here to hear and see? This is going to be awful.

"A creamery boy," Kate Cooper said in her leering, giggly way, "is quite a step up from a barn boy, isn't he, Freda? You're coming along."

She's a fool, Freda thought, and her contempt steadied her further.

"This party's a disgrace," Luella said. "I'll see Ed Thomas about it."

"Pratt," Blanche put in. "That's the boy she was involved with."

"Everyone knows that," Ida snapped. "If you can't contribute some-

thing useful, Blanche, for goodness' sake, keep still. And, Luella, don't wander so. This is serious. You two haven't daughters, but I have; and they're here tonight, and I don't care to have them associate with girls of Freda's type."

In a voice that sounded to her own ears miles distant, Freda asked: "Haven't I been punished enough? Yes, I had too many drinks that other night, but I've paid enough. In all fairness, don't you think so?"

Amos said gently: "Don't defend. There's no need. Hit back."

"No, I don't," Luella said, "considering the state you're in now."

"I tell you—" Freda began.

"Don't defend," Amos repeated. "Hit back."

Mrs. Cooper giggled. "I guess there was more to pay for than just having 'too much to drink,' wasn't there?"

Her steadiness cracking, Freda cried furiously, "No, there wasn't!" and bit her lip to keep from rushing on hysterically. Half the party, she saw, had been attracted and were forming an irregular semicircle to listen.

"The guilty deny the loudest," Ida said.

"Hit back," Amos insisted.

She thought, I *could* hit back. In front of all these people I could tell Ida about Mary and Eunice and shame her horribly. I could!

Roxy Dann said: "Don't tell us you hid away this long just because you got tipsy. Oh, no, Freda, that's just too—"

"Yes, dear," Blanche echoed. "It's so nice you felt able to come tonight so *soon* after the other party."

"It's been six months," Freda said. "How do you like my dress?" She stared at them defiantly, flushing slowly crimson as the words she had not weighed echoed in her ears. She was ashamed of the crudeness of what they had implied, but she was rewarded with disconcerted silence and surprised looks.

Behind her, Amos chuckled.

Ida cried, "That remark has more sophistication than any innocent girl your age should possess!"

It was a defensive answer, and Freda had a quick feeling of power. She said, "Mrs. Heim, I'm not afraid of you any more," and it was true. "I'm not afraid of any of you. I was. I was scared to death of your nasty, lying tongues, but tonight— Well, everybody here knows who's been drinking and who hasn't, so they know you now for just what you are. I've been silly to hide from you. Almost as silly as you were to talk about me. Well, I'm through hiding. I'm through being driven away from fun



by people like you. So I'm going to stay right here and enjoy myself till I'm ready to go home, and if it—if it corrupts Mary and Eunice, that's just too bad. But there isn't a thing you can do to stop me! Is there—now that I'm not afraid of what you might say?"

Amos said abruptly: "Come on, let's dance. I'm bored with this."

And as they turned away, Sonia was beside them, her face radiant. "I knew you could do it, Freda. I just knew if you faced them you'd find out what insignificant people they are."

Freda caught the woman's hands and squeezed them. "Thanks for the dress," she whispered. "Thanks loads for—everything." Then she swung away in Amos's arms.

The radio moved from the night clubs to Times Square, and Ben gathered his party from card-playing, gossip, and dancing to group around it and welcome the New Year in. As the Times Square chorus swelled and broke, Clint Matlock found himself being embraced from behind and turned to find an unsteady Mary Heim in his arms, crying, "There it is—midnight! Kiss me, Clint. Happy New Year!"

Clint complied in the spirit of the occasion, only to find Mary's kiss anything but casual. He broke away, aware of having made a mistake.

"Wheel!" Mary cried. "After that I need a drink!"

"Uh-uh. You've had plenty. Remember your mother."

"Ma'll raise hell, but gimme another."

"Nope. About two more swallows, and you'll be sick."

She drew back, and her expression was fishy. She said, "Sometimes I don't like you much!" and walked away, leaving him frowning and oddly sobered. He watched her attach herself to Vic Stewart, who presently led her toward the kitchen sink where the makings were.

What a party! Clint thought. And what a morning after there would be! For the Goetzes and for others. Everyone was high, and the humor and antics were becoming bawdy.

Some few had had enough. Luella and Kate were stuffing their reluctant, unsteady husbands into coats and hats and guiding them, against Ben's urgent protests, to the door. A little later, Ida Heim started looking for her children and, having collected them and Adrian, departed, looking grim. No one seemed to regret their departure, and the door had barely closed before Blanche Ochs was calling for the drinks she had been afraid to ask for, all evening.

Before the evening was over, one of the barn boys was sick off the front porch, and Hal Roane left for home, sagging limply between Jake

Larsen and Tom North. Still later, Swan Ellis had to be helped home, and Sonia was glad that Amos Vliet was there to assist Freda.

By two-thirty things were breaking up. By three Sonia had said good-bye to Blanche and Larry Ochs and there was only Lew Barchi still to go. He was getting into his overcoat when she glanced through the kitchen doorway and saw Ben sitting at the poker table staring glassy-eyed at the litter of cards and chips.

Her heart sank, and she thought: Oh, dear! I hoped he'd make it; I thought he was going to. He was all right a minute ago!

But that was the way Ben went.

Barchi followed her glance and grunted. "Guess you need some help," he said. Removing his coat, he went into the kitchen, put a hand on Ben's shoulder, and shook him.

She said, "He won't wake. If I could only get him to the couch—"

Barchi said, "I'll take him upstairs for you."

"But your leg—"

"I can manage."

He knelt, draped the thin, sitting figure across his back, and heaved upright, staggering; but, once squared away, he carried Ben easily, walking upstairs without pause. His limp, Sonia noticed as she followed, was not apparent when he carried a burden.

"Where?" he asked.

She passed him, leading the way into the guest room and opening the bed. Barchi dumped Ben unceremoniously onto it.

Downstairs again, she tried to thank him. "It's so hard when he's in that state. I couldn't have managed alone, Lew, and I'm grateful. I've been afraid all evening—it takes so little to send Ben under."

"Quite a party you had!"

"And I can't understand it! We provided drinks, of course, but—well, I suppose a good many brought something of their own too."

"Must have," Barchi said. "The place was afloat. Anyway, they had a good time. I did at least. I won at poker, got pleasantly high. The only thing I didn't do was dance with my hostess. Is it too late for that?"

She said doubtfully, "Why-y . . ."

"I know it's no fun for a girl, dancing with a cripple—"

"It isn't that. We might dance once, I suppose."

He said, "It'd mean something to me."

She tuned down the radio, feeling depressed as she looked at the disarranged furniture, the paper streamers and caps lying in a tangled mess

on the naked floor, the soiled glasses, the refreshment plates sloppy with melted ice cream, crumbly and smeared with broken canapés. Seeing that someone had spilled a drink over her best chair, she sighed.

Lew danced efficiently though with a tendency, because of his leg, to make all his turns in one direction. Sonia was self-conscious dancing alone with him and, hoping it would be soon over, hinted, "There'll be lots—including me—who won't want to get up for work in the morning."

But he merely grinned. "I'm lucky. The holidays fall on Wednesday this year—my day off! I'm making the most of it. What say? Another drink?"

"I don't think we'd better, do you? I mean—"

"What? That I oughta clear out? or I've had enough?"

"Neither, of course! I'll fix you another, if you like."

She led him to the kitchen and the array of bottles in the sink, and let him fix his own from the leavings there.

"Have one with me," he said. "It would help—even a small one."

The phrasing bothered her only momentarily. She thought: I might as well; I can't sit and look impatient while he drinks his, and I *do* feel low. What little she had had earlier had worn off.

Back in the living room he said, "Fed up with Ben?"

"No. What for? Oh, you mean for getting tight? No, Lew, merely thankful he lasted as long as he did."

"You're a beautiful little liar," he said. "You wouldn't have danced with me or be drinking with me now if you weren't fed up."

She frowned, but weariness dulled her annoyance.

"Y' know what the two of you ought to do?" he said. "Call it quits."

There was silence while she tried to summon the anger and the words to combat his impertinence. She achieved neither. He added: "I should 've said this the other night when you were in the mood. It's no good now—you don't want to listen. But it's the only chance I'll have, probably, to get this off my chest—"

"Don't bother. I'm not interested."

"I know. But it's time somebody said it to you, and I guess it's gotta be me. Look: you and Ben can't ever be happy. I mean real, honest-to-God happy. Because you're mismatched. Get it outa your head Ben's goina change. He's not. He'll never be anything but what he is. So why ruin your lives? Make the break while you still got what it takes to make your own way—and find some other guy, mebbe."

"I think you'd better go home."

"O.K. But I'm tellin' you: a strong woman married to a weak man is no good. It's funny-paper stuff—only it ain't funny. You and Ben wanta be like Maggie and Jiggs—"

"Stop it!" She was angry at last. "I've had enough. You're being impertinent, not amusing—"

"That's what the truth is. But I'm telling you: people don't change. That's a pipe dream about the crook that reforms or the weakling that turns out a hero. Figure it out. Do people ever want to change themselves? Naw; always the other guy! Do you think *you're* going to change? Do you want to? You bet not! It's Ben—"

"You're drunk," Sonia said incredulously.

"Prob'ly—you need to be to say things like this! But it ain't every woman gets the chance to hear what she oughta hear. You're tied to a weakling, see? But think of Ben. He's tied to a female whose strength and ambition he can't match. That's worse. Get a divorce now, and the two of you might still make out."

She cried with cold fury: "You've said what you wanted to say. Now please go."

He nodded, grinning. "Sure—only not after quarreling, see? What I said is only what I know's best for you and for him. You know I mean it like that—huh?"

"I know you've trespassed on private property. You've thrust your advice on me because one night when I was in a foul mood—"

"D'ya have to feel lousy to be honest, you women? You were honest that night, a' right: you knew what you were doing to Ben, and what your chances of happiness were. Now everything's perfect!"

"Everything's *not* perfect; I've never pretended it was. That night I was ready to weep on someone's shoulder, and it happened to be yours; but you've no right to interfere again because of it. It's easy for you to say, 'Leave Ben.' Yes, and I can admit we have our troubles. But you see, we're in love, and that makes up for so much."

Barchi's gesture was impatient. "Love! What would you know about love, either of you? Oh, he dotes on you, sure! Like you was out of his reach. And you—for you, he takes the place of the kids you can't have, gives you someone to take care of. But as for loving him—"

"Stop it! The idea! The nerve of you!" She groped futilely for adequate words. "Oh, *will* you get out of this house before—"

His lips twisted. "Struck a sore spot, didn't I? Yeah, a woman can kid herself she loves a weakling; but in her heart she wants to be made to stand around, made to lick her man's boots sometimes. Doesn't she?"

But you'll never know that side of love with Ben. It'd take a man to teach you that. I could do it!"

"You!" The anticlimax exploded her hysterical anger. As tag line to a string of absurdities, it was the last straw.

Yet immediately she wished she had not laughed, for Lew Barchi went dead white at the sound, and the pale blue of his eyes was suddenly opaque. She had hurt him, and on the heels of this knowledge, she thought: Is it possible he's in love with me? But he can't be! He isn't! That's too ridiculous.

"Yes. Why not?" he said, his voice thin. "Because I'm a cripple, because I'm ugly, can't I have normal feelings?"

"Oh, but—I didn't mean—I'm sorry—"

She choked, and the words ended in air.

She thought: I'm as good as alone with him here; if I had to scream Ben wouldn't hear, not in his condition. And she thought: He's very drunk; he doesn't show it much, but he is.

He had made no move; there was no flicker of expression in his long death's-head of a face, and yet, unless it was her imagination, there had been a change.

Abruptly, she was afraid of him.

He set aside his empty glass and got up. Instinct made her rise too, and as he came toward her she backed away till the wall stopped her.

He said thinly: "I'm human—see?—even if I am a cripple. And men don't like to be laughed at—about some things."

"I'm sorry. Honestly! You made me so angry, I—I—"

"Said what you meant? Yeah, I guess so."

He had not raised his voice, but she saw a beading of moisture on his forehead; he was holding himself in hand with an effort, and she could not guess how far he might go if his temper exploded.

She stammered: "P-please go now, Mr. Barchi. It's late. If I said the wrong thing, it's only because it *is* late and I'm tired—"

"So it's 'Mr. Barchi' now?"

"Well—if you like: good night—Lew!"

She extended what she hoped was a friendly hand, but his left met it, his thin fingers closing tightly on her wrist.

She struggled violently. "What are you trying to do? Let me go!" Pressure on her forearm pulled her forward and down. "Don't! You're hurting. Let me go, or I'll scream."

"Better not. I might break your arm." He meant it.

His face was twisted and ugly. He held her in that awkward, bent

position without moving or relaxing the pressure, without betraying what he planned to do. Surely nothing serious, she told herself insistently; nothing really serious could happen in your own house with a man you knew. He wants to humiliate me, she thought; he'll make me crawl at his feet or—or strike me, but—nothing worse, surely!

Her mouth was dry and tasted of brass; she was panting as though she had run a long way, and her body felt cold and damp; the bent position was intolerable so that at last she sank to her knees in front of him.

Abruptly, as though it were a signal, he let her go. He said, "There are other ways that'll hurt worse." Turning to the hallway where his coat and hat were, he shrugged into them. "I've had a lovely evening. I hope I can give you as lovely a one some day. Good night, Mrs. Goetz."

Reaction left her too weak to move. She was hysterically thankful he had gone. Hurt worse than what? she wondered. What had he intended actually? Had he lost his nerve? Or was the day of reckoning merely postponed because he had thought of a more satisfying revenge?

## XX

A DAMP snow fell lazily through still air, the big flakes melting wearily on the pavements, on the tops of trucks lined up for service outside the garage, on the shoulders of Ed Thomas's overcoat as he stood with Red Walsh beside the latest addition to the dairy's fleet, parked apart from the rest.

"Look at her, for God's sake," Red said. "A beauty! New as a bride, not a mark on her—and you want to give her to Larsen!"

The manager shrugged. "He'd howl to heaven if we took another truck away from him. He resents criticism of his driving so—"

"Let him howl. His yelling can't hurt us."

Ed kicked at the truck's front tire and shook his head. His reasons for the decision, taken in the face of his own better judgment, were obscure to himself; but deep down he felt that it might be wise, now that Tom was openly antagonistic, to make no more enemies among the drivers. Tom's attitude worried him.

The garageman was still arguing when Jake Larsen himself drove over from the creamery and walked toward them. "Hey, man!" he said.

"Some job!" He walked all around the machine, his face alive with excitement, and, having completed the circuit, faced them tensely. "Well, do I get her this time?"

Ed sighed. "I guess so, Jake."

"No kidding!" He touched the white paint and the blue decalcomania on the side, opened the doors to peer in. "She's all right!"

"Now look: there's a governor on it, and if—"

"Governor? What the hell for? I drive slow enough. I drive good! Have I ever had an accident—a bad one, I mean? Have I? Hell, you won't see a scratch on that truck—if those garage guys are careful parking her!"

"Jake, no matter what you think, your driving's lousy—"

Red said, "You jerk hell out of a car starting and stopping—"

"You take corners and intersections like a fool. I've seen you."

"And—goddam it!—use second gear. Quit skipping from low to high!"

Jake snarled: "All right, all right! Just because I drove the old trucks crazy sometimes because I didn't care what happened to 'em don't mean I will this. Look? Can I take her out now? Just for a test?"

"No, you can't," Red said.

"Why not? 'F I take her on the route tomorrow, I oughta get the feel of her first. Just a *little* test? To the State Road and back?"

Ed said, "All right. But be careful, damn your soul."

Red winced as Jake started the motor, raced it, backed the truck without looking, and leapt ahead in his usual startled fashion. He said to Thomas: "You forgot it was snowing, maybe? You want to get that machine smashed up before it's been on the route, even?"

"He has to drive it eventually." Ed sounded tired. "By the way: order a furnace and heating system for the Norths, will you?"

Red looked surprised. "Giving in, finally? . . . O.K., O.K. Don't get sore. What'll I figure on? Radiators in every room? Steam heat? What kind of furnace?"

"An ordinary coal one. As cheap as possible."

"Right. And the other houses? Couple need heat worse 'n Tom's."

"We'll take care of them as fast as we can. Now, keep quiet about this. The farm'll know all too soon!"

He turned away unreasonably displeased. He sensed that Red was still critical whereas he had expected some sort of approval of what was, in essence, a generous gift. He was not giving in, he told himself. There was no longer any question of force. Since the women had called that

day, no one, not even Tom, had mentioned furnaces again. His decision now had been taken of his own free will and in the holiday spirit.

A little later, in the office, Wharton Petitt brought the first-of-the-month checks to be signed. One he had separated from the rest.

Ed, looking at it, frowned. "But the guarantee expired—"

"Yes. Ben's check fell way off—"

"But I don't understand! This check—Barchi's—why, it's actually larger than what he was getting under the guarantee, isn't it?"

"Not quite—by two dollars and sixty-five cents!"

"But what happened? He was in here last month saying his route wasn't nearly built up, wanting his guarantee extended—"

"Of course! And when you told him it wouldn't be, he went out and got to work. Carly says he's put on fifty-odd customers for a total of seventy-five or more quarts."

"But he *couldn't* have! December's a hard month for milk sales—"

"Some were lined up ahead of time. At least he started delivering them on the 3rd—the day after his kick to you. He put on sixteen customers in the first three days."

"I'll be *god-damned*!"

"He's dogged it all summer and fall," Petitt said flatly, "ridden his guarantee while it lasted, done his best to get it extended. And now it's perfectly clear he could have filled his route back in June! . . . What are we going to do about it?"

"What can we do about it?"

"We can cut his route again tomorrow, and—if he doesn't like it—fire him! We ought to fire him anyway. He's a troublemaker."

"You can't fire a man who sells milk like that, Whart!"

Wharton Petitt snorted. "If you don't think I can, let me try!"

In the drivers' room, the boys were waiting for their checks and griping about Petitt's slowness. In between they talked about Ben Goetz's party. Barchi, apart, his shoulders against the steam pipes and one leg stretched along the bench, listened with a somber expression, baiting Ben once or twice to see if Sonia had mentioned the party's early-morning aftermath, though he was fairly sure from Ben's whole attitude that she had not.

Petitt rapped on the window finally, and Chief Myhychyk went in for the envelopes. Barchi checked the contents of his, ran his eye over the



slip explaining the commissions and deductions, then stuffed envelope and all into his pocket.

The others examined the contents of their envelopes with varied pleasure or disappointment, and began collecting coats and gloves. Before the movement to leave became general, Barchi asked, "D any you guys get a raise?"

His answer was a set of startled looks. Hal Roane snapped, "Did you?"

"No, but the rest of the farm did!"

It sank in slowly. Hack Dunty asked, "How d'ya know?" and Ben said, "No kidding!" as though the bottom had dropped out. Then there were mutters of disbelief, protest, question. Out of it Ben's voice demanded, "How did you find out?"

"Carly's getting a raise. Ask him if he isn't!"

Carly jumped. "Me! I don't know—I haven't got my check yet."

"You're getting five dollars more. So are the creamery, the barn and the chicken boys. The garage is getting ten. So's Vaccarelli and Tatum on the farm. The department heads get fifteen, and God only knows what the office has given itself!"

"And what the hell's the matter with us?" the Chief demanded.

"Blame it on me," Barchi said viciously. "I tried to get you guys a raise last summer, and now the damn farm's taking it out on us all—"

"Oh, hell!" Tom North said. "They wouldn't do that!"

Barchi leaned forward suddenly, and his fist banged the table. "How long you suckers goina be the bastards of this joint? Don't it make you sore to get stepped on all the time? Look! Didn't any of you hear about the Christmas bonus the office cut for itself? the nine hundred bucks that Ed got while slipping us a thin ten apiece—"

"You damn right, chief!" Myhychyk said. "I yelled about it—loud! I guess you didn't hear. You been asleep all month—"

"The hell I was! I been waiting. I been waiting for just this—today! I thought maybe it'd make some of you guys see red, like it does me. Jesus Christ! You bunch of dopes—"

Myhychyk protested indignantly: "I been yelling for action for months! It's been *you* wouldn't get sore. You been dead on your feet!"

"O.K., so I'm sore now. So forget it! Let's get out of here. Where can we talk? Your house, Hal?" Barchi got to his feet.

"Guess so."

Larsen muttered, "If Stewart isn't there," and the words fell in a gap, distinct and sly. Hal seemed not to notice, but white lines appeared beneath his nostrils.

Barchi said hastily: "How 'bout it, Tom? Still feel like you did the first of the week? Coming, Chief? Dunty? Jake?"

Myhychyk said, "You betcha, chief!" But Jake muttered, "To hell with the raise. I ain't sore. I got a new truck." And Dunty looked shifty. "Ben?"

"Me? Naw-w. I—I don't belong with the rest of you—"

Barchi said: "The hell you don't, boy! You feel like I do about route cutting, long hours, and our needing a salesman—and you feel like I do about getting gypped out of this raise. So come on: get in on it."

"No. I—I can't. I don't blame you. I get pretty sick of things myself. But—your kind of action isn't—isn't my way. Sorry. I'm staying out."

"For now." Barchi looked down at him with a hard expression and added deliberately: "But not for so goddam much longer, Ben! Make up your mind to that. Come on, you guys."

## XXI

SCUFFING through the damp snow toward the lower barn, Charlie Dann heard someone singing, and frowned because he had thought no one was around but Dick Flemhos and he had never heard Dick sing. He kicked at the snow, realizing that the problem of getting rid of Dick had drifted gradually to the back of his mind. Pushing the boy around had become a game, and the urgency behind it had somehow faded. Sometimes it amused him that Dick, doing nearly two men's work, had become invaluable around the barns; but often he wondered why Flemhos stood it; and occasionally he was uneasy, thinking of the hate Dick would be storing up, and of his vengeful nature.

A double line of cows watched with mild curiosity as he stepped into the barn, stamped snow off his feet, and moved to the feed room.

It was Dick singing after all.

Charlie growled, "What are you so happy about?" and Flemhos shied, looking as guilty as though he were doing something wrong.

Then his lips quirked defiantly. "What's it to you? I'm working, ain't I—stacking this feed where you said?"

"I never heard you happy about it before."

"Ain't I got a right to sing if I feel like it? O.K.—so I do."

"Why? What's there to sing about?"

Dick's expression was oddly triumphant and defiant, and Charlie snarled: "Tell me, goddam it—if you know what's good for you!"

"Go ahead and threaten! I won't have to take it much longer. I may be leaving, see? If you gotta know, that's why I'm singing."

"If I was sure of it, I'd sing myself. Where'd you go?"

"To join Boo."

Charlie's heart leapt, raced like a motor out of gear, and his voice was unsteady as he repeated, "Boo! What about him? Where is he?"

"Hartford. Got a swell job in a plane factory—gets twice what he got here. They're takin' on more men, and he says maybe he can get me in if I want a job. He says to write. So pretty soon I may be going."

It was good news and yet it left Charlie trembling. Almost reluctantly he asked, "How d'ya know all this?"

"Got a letter. I knew he'd write if I waited here."

"A letter!" Charlie repeated, and ran a tongue over dry lips. "He say anything—more in it? Anything about the farm?"

"Yeah, some. So what? Whose letter was it, anyway?"

Something within Charlie shouted, "Don't ask—don't ask!" but he had to. "Was there—anything in it—about me?"

Instantly he knew that there had been—and what it was. Dick betrayed it first by a perceptible change of expression. To Charlie's eyes, his triumph seemed almost gloating now, and there was an evil, malicious amusement in his face. "Yeah," he said, "he mentioned you."

Charlie cleared the obstruction in his throat. "What did he say?"

Dick laughed. "You wouldn't want to hear."

"You got the letter with you?"

"No. Why?"

Charlie's hand, reaching for the hay-fork against the wall, relaxed slowly and fell back. A queer look struck Dick's face, and his amusement faded. He shot a glance at the door and edged toward it. "Look, I gotta be going," he said. "I—uh—got things to do before supper, see. So long."

After he had gone, Charlie found himself sweating. . . .

Dick was sweating too. Up to a point it had been fun, but Charlie had got real sore there at the end. He was not sure why, but Charlie had meant business with that fork. Lucky he hadn't told him what Boo had said! He'd have exploded. Dick grinned again, remembering. Boo had certainly used a couple of choice adjectives in the one brief reference he had made to his former boss.

It had turned cold. A strong steady wind, blowing beneath clear skies brilliant with many stars, made Charlie shiver in spite of overcoat and gloves. He hated cold, and his short, querulous temper flared against it so that he swore into the darkness. The alcohol which filled him was no longer a warm glow but a leaden weight; he had been drinking since early evening, and it was after midnight now. Leaning into the wind, consciously avoiding the light that radiated from the creamery and barns up the road, he circled to the front of the boarding house, the now frozen, pitted snow crunching beneath his feet in spite of his effort to be quiet. Climbing the porch, he stumbled noisily and began cursing again, not at his own buzzy condition, but at the inanimate step that had tripped him. He had not been heard, however, perhaps because of the howling wind; the boarding house remained silent.

There was a light in the lower hall, and he scouted through the glass of the door before entering. And then, inside, he halted again to listen guiltily, feeling foolish as he did so because the precaution was inane. After all, he had a right to be here. Still, knowing what he was about to do, he felt frightened and had to prick himself with the thought that it must be done, for he was no criminal—merely a man driven by the Furies of his own failure.

The noise of the wind got on his nerves, and, knowing he must act or back out, he climbed the stairs slowly, taking sotted care not to stumble again. Most of the doors on the upper corridor were closed and silent; but the one into the dormitory was open, and again he halted, standing in it a long while, swaying slightly, facing the blackness and listening.

With luck, there should be no one here. The barn boys were all at the midnight milking—all but Donny Ochs whose night off it was—and Donny, along with the farm hands who lived here, *ought* to be in town; it was a Saturday night.

They ought to have been, and yet above the steady bawling of the wind came the sound of regular breathing. Someone in there was asleep. One person, apparently, though that was as good as a dozen, he thought in disappointment and relief; he could not search in the dark, not knowing which was Dick's bed, even, or where he kept his things.

The door jamb met his shoulder with unexpected solidity and he grunted. The breathing choked, and a voice said, "Who's that?"

He said, without thinking, "Me—Charlie."

"Oh—you want me?" It was Donny, after all.

"Yes."

"Turn on the light. There by the door. What's the matter?"

Wondering what to say, Charlie fumbled for the switch. Save for Donny, the dormitory was empty, and none of the beds had been slept in, though many were cluttered with discarded clothes. The place smelled of the barns.

He wondered dully which was Dick's bed. There was no telling.

I have to get out of here, he thought: I feel lousy. Damn it, which is Dick's bed anyway?

He was not conscious of speaking aloud, but Donny said, sounding puzzled, "The second one down. Why?"

"Uh— Oh! Well where does he keep his—clothes and things?"

"That chest of drawers and the clothespress. Why?"

"Look: hop over to the barns, will you? They're short-handed."

"How come?"

"Someone skipped out," Charlie said vaguely. "I do' know who."

Donny stared skeptically, aware that Charlie gave him the worst of everything whenever possible. But then he said wearily, "O.K., boss!" and swung his legs out of bed. Charlie, thinking of Dick, was startled when he added sharply, "You don't have to hang around. I said I'd go!"

"Uh—sure. I was just—"

Charlie drifted out and down the stairs. He decided he would slam the outer door, then wait in the darkened dining room. He waited impatiently while the wind ripped about the house, shaking it. Little drafts of cold air seeped in and set him shivering. He and Donny were alone here; but it was getting late, and some of the boys who were out might be returning. He wished the boy would hurry.

Donny came down at last and went out, and the creaking of his feet across the frozen snow was perfectly plain, even above the wind. Charlie thought: If he listened after I closed that door, he'll know I didn't leave; I forgot the snow. . . . Donny's not dumb, either.

He felt frightened, but went back upstairs anyway.

In the dormitory, he considered the drawers, the clothespress, the bed. A dirty, discarded coverall lay across the latter, and he went through its pockets first, then looked under Dick's pillow, through his blankets, under his mattress. Then he tried the clothespress. This took some time, because it held more than Dick's clothes and he found several letters that had to be opened and identified. He began to think he would never finish; and his fear of being caught, his dread of failure, the alcoholic misery of his stomach combined into terror and wretchedness.

He turned finally to the chest of drawers. Dick shared these as well and they were a jumble, but right on top was a promising lot of letters.

He had them in his hand and had just discovered they were Donny's when he was interrupted.

"What the hell are you after?" Dick asked.

The sound of the wind had covered his approach, or else he had been very quiet. Charlie could only stare at him, there in the doorway.

"Donny said sumpin was funny, said you were asking about my things. What gives?"

So the two he hated worst had ganged up on him.

No, Charlie thought, Donny was not dumb! But—was Dick?

He thrust the letters forward. "*His* things I was going through, see? I fooled him."

Dick scowled doubtfully. "Those letters you got his?" His face changed. "Oh! Interested in *letters*, are you? So that's it?"

Charlie quit pretending. "Where is it?"

"It's mine! You can't have it for the asking."

Charlie was in no mood to argue. His temper was short, and he turned deliberately back to the drawers, snapping sharply as Dick made a move to stop him, "Stay where you are!"

Dick shouted, "Get out of there! What you want of my things? You can't steal my letters. Ride me in the barns, goddam it—you're boss there, I hafta take it—but that letter's my own private business. You got no right with it. You get out of here!"

Charlie said, "Don't get tough, or you'll get what Boo got."

Dick laughed; but his fists were clenched, and he was darkly flushed. "Just try and get me fired! I don't have to take any more from you, Charlie—not a damned thing more!"

Charlie read it as a threat, fear and hate gnawing him. His mouth was sour, but his hot, shifty eyes cast about covertly for a weapon. Wind shook the building. He knew what he must do—and was afraid.

He said: "Don't ask for it! I gave it to your stinking little pal, and I can give it to you."

"*Keep your goddam tongue off him!*"

Charlie blanched at the fury of the tone and backed a step away. Trying to whip up his courage, he sneered: "That sniveling yellow coward. Bawling! Crawling on his hands and knees. Whimpering like a kid! That's the way you'll act too, when the time comes—"

"You're a liar! I saw him go, didn't I? I was there that night. What do you mean, he took it whimpering? He went off with you grinning, like always!"

"One poke wiped the grin off," Charlie said. "Just one. And he was

on his knees yelling for mercy a half-minute later—like you'll be! Bawling like a baby—"

He stopped because Dick was gaping in astonishment.

For an instant, Charlie was merely bewildered.

If this was news to Dick, then the letter . . .

The slow seconds ticked by to the steady howling of the wind, and the two faced each other in silence while comprehension grew in each.

"You beat him up before he left," Dick muttered finally, incredulously. "That night you went off together." And then he exploded. "You bastard! You goddam bastard!" He took a step, and his fist lashed out.

Charlie catapulted backward, crashing over a chair and into a bed, and the starch was out of him. He was too old to take pain, and both blow and fall had hurt. Nauseated, terrified of Dick's boots, he huddled groaning where he had fallen.

He could hear Dick's panting breath, but the boy did not kick him. He said no more and did no more.

After an interminable while, Dick turned and stumbled out.

Charlie was waiting for the manager when the latter stopped at the office after church next morning.

"Well, it's happened," he said. "That Flemhos boy struck me last night. Knocked me down."

Ed Thomas muttered, "Oh, damn! . . . More trouble."

"Trouble?" Charlie pursed scornful lips. "Why, I wasn't even gonna bother you, only there he was at the milking this morning. He ran away after it—see?—and I didn't think he'd dare come back, even to get his check but— Now he'll have to be fired."

"Yeah. What happened, anyway?"

"Happened? Why, I been telling you: he struck me—"

"Yes, but why? Where? What led up to it?"

Assurance yielded to a frown. "What's the difference? He struck me."

Sitting with one pudgy thigh on the desk corner, Ed said: "I'll back you department heads to the limit—hiring, firing, everything. But not blindly. I want to know details, between ourselves."

"What's the good? It happened. Details won't change it."

"Perhaps not. But you see—I know you have it in for Dick."

His foxy, pointed face gone white, Charlie Dann shook his head.

"You're making this hard."

"You'll take my word. You would from any other department head."

"You don't understand. I'm trying to be just. I hold no brief for

Flemhos. I don't even like him, and we might be better off without him. But you've come to me before with wild accusations, and—I'm sorry, Charlie!—I want to know more."

The barn man was not prepared to handle this. Evidence of the low level to which his stock had fallen in the office, it shocked him profoundly; but after a long moment he offered a sullen, shaky explanation: "All right, then—I asked him to do something, and he wouldn't. When I tried to make him, he struck me. That's all."

"What did you ask him to do?"

This brought another flare because Dann knew the limits of his inventiveness and was afraid to elaborate: "I won't be treated as though I was on trial. Either take my word and fire him, or else fire me!" He sweated blood while he waited for the answer.

Ed sighed. "We shouldn't have made an issue of this, Charlie. The boy's not worth it. If you feel like that, of course I'll take your word. I'll see Dick and give him his check this noon."

"No, I'll see him! It's my privilege."

"It's no privilege to fire a person." The reproof was tart. "Besides, I want to talk with him before he goes."

"So you still won't take my word—"

"Oh, damn it! You can't have everything your way, Charlie. I'll fire him, but I'll do it as I choose. Now that's enough!"

"But—but, Ed, I—I happen to know he'll say things. He—he threatened to! Don't believe everything he says. He'll tell you terrible lies—"

"Then come along and deny them."

Charlie hesitated, but there was no real question. Much as he dreaded a showdown, he could not have kept himself from going.

Flemhos saw them coming from the boarding-house windows and was filled with fierce joy. So he was to get in his licks after all! He knew they were coming to fire him, for he remembered striking Charlie Dann well enough. The rest of the night was blank. In those last strained moments before his fist had landed, he had felt the same cold tension building up that he had felt in the hayloft that time he had become so excited over betraying himself to Mickey Pratt; and after he had left Charlie on the floor and run from the room a black fog had blotted out everything just as it had before. But he remembered the blow, remembered it with elation and pleasure.

He had wakened in the wheat barn, of all places, feeling surprisingly good. He had known it was useless to come back to work, but the in-



stinct to stay where Boo could reach him, coupled with a bravado desire to watch Charlie's face when he showed up, had taken him to the morning milking.

Now he met them eagerly in the boarding-house hallway and led them to the upper floor and the dormitory. None of them sat down. Ed Thomas stood in the doorway, blocking it, and Charlie drifted slowly to the window, trying to catch Dick's eye with a warning look.

Ed said, "Charlie claims you struck him last night, Dick?"

Flemhos swelled visibly, and his dark, intent eyes were hot. He said flatly, "That's a lie!"

The barn man leapt and whirled. "What! Why—"

"Wait! . . . If you didn't hit him, what happened?"

"I almost hit him. I had plenty reason to. I cocked my fist, see? But I didn't let fly, and if he says I did he's a cockeyed liar!"

Charlie's temper exploded.

Ed said: "Hold it. Calling names won't help—"

"But he knocked me down! He did! Here's the bruise where he hit me, and there's others where I fell over the chair that I can show. I can prove it—"

"Fell over a chair! Didn't this happen at the barns?"

"It happened here," Dick said, "but I didn't hit him. I knew better'n to hit him—even after what I'd found out!"

"What had you found out?"

Charlie shrilled, "I warned you about his lies!"

"What had you found out, Dick?"

"How he beat up Boo. He told me. He boasted. He said he took him out the night Boo got fired and poked him, beat him! He's trying to get me fired now, not 'cause I hit him but 'cause of what I know!"

"That's a lie—" Charlie stopped because of the way Ed was regarding him.

Ed said: "Then tell me, Charlie. Why *did* Dick strike you?"

"'Cause I called Boo a few names, that's all. That's why."

"He did that, all right—and plenty more!"

"He's lying!"

Ed stared at the two in utter incredulity.

Charlie demanded, "Why would I have beat up Boo, anyway?"

"Why, Dick?"

"Search me! Only he did. And threatened to beat me too!"

The manager said, "Oh, for the love of God!" He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. "One of you's lying. Maybe you both are! Frankly

I don't know which—and don't care. But I do know this: There'll be no firing, Charlie, till I get to the bottom of it. Let Dick go on working. This isn't closed, and until it is—lay off him! I'm not impressed with your attitude in all this."

The barn man, scarcely able to believe it had happened, knew he was squarely against it at last; knew that he must be proved right—must discredit Dick once and for all. Otherwise, he might as well leave Weyland Meadows here and now.

## XXII

AMOS VLIET had been invited to the Ellises' for dinner, and from the first it had struck him as odd. "There won't be anyone but ourselves," Swan had said. "Even Ed'll be out." Amos knew and respected the farm man, but had never flattered himself that he had attracted his attention.

At one moment he had wondered if the girl Freda were behind it, trying to follow up their meeting at the Goetzes'; but now, lingering on the Ellis porch after Swan had closed the door, he knew that this had been a foolish thought. To be sure, Freda had eaten with them; but she had hardly spoken throughout dinner, and afterward had retired to the kitchen immediately and not returned, even to say Good night.

Buttoning his coat against the mild cold, Amos stepped slowly off the porch. It was a beautiful, clear night with a nearly full moon riding high; the world, still clad in the snow that had frozen almost a week ago, had a modernistic black-and-silver brightness in which things were either vividly clear or impenetrably dark. The air was crisp, with a smoky flavor, and the temperature hovered, as it had all week, just below freezing. Amos shuffled through the lilac hedge between Ellises' and the new creamery, careful lest he slip on the light, loose snow that was dusted over the frozen crust.

No, it was Swan himself who had engineered the dinner. They had spent the evening closeted, talking in guarded tones—and terms.

Swan had talked around the point. Had Amos thought at all about a realignment of jobs at the farm? Ed Thomas might be moving on soon, and perhaps "certain people" might profitably consider—and plan against—the possibility.

Amos had begun to see what he was getting at.

"I've talked with Melius," Ellis had said.

He believed, in short, that he was to be the next manager if and when Ed left, and he was contemplating a new set-up, certain changes.

"There's dead wood," he had said. "If I ever have my say, we'll have a new barn man, for one." And naturally someone new would be needed to take over Swan's own farm department. Adrian Heim might have to go—"to avoid friction"—and Larry Ochs. "Larry's a weak sister, and Ed knows it as well as we do; he put him in at a bad moment, and now he can't find an adequate excuse to get rid of him. With a new broom sweeping, that's no problem, of course."

He had implied that Amos was no weak sister.

The conversation had been vague and indefinite as though the two were daydreaming aloud, but it had amounted to an offer; and Amos, who could not afford to disregard it, hated equally to commit himself, and was grateful for the indirection because it required its answer in the same terms.

Picking his way across the treacherous ungraded ground beside the new building, and rounding its end so close that he could touch the wall with his hand, he halted to finger the cold brick thoughtfully.

Yes, he would like to be manager of this plant some day. He had watched it grow, watched its walls and roof go up, its interior take shape; and, almost unnoticed, an intention had been born: he was going to be its manager. The only question was one of method.

And the best might not be by teaming with Swan Ellis.

Even if Ed Thomas left—something rumored time and again—who was to say that Swan would succeed? Swan ran his own department exceptionally well, but would Melius think him capable of handling the whole dairy? Amos remembered too well that the other had been passed over once before when Thomas had replaced Wycoff.

But, for all that, it was a serious problem. So far Amos had hitched his wagon to Thomas's star—and there was a little financial arrangement for February to prove that he had chosen well. It seemed foolish to cast off and beg a more doubtful hitch from Swan. Still, if Ed *did* leave and Swan *were* manager . . .

He was thankful for the man's vagueness. It gave him time to think.

Collecting his work clothes from the car, he recrossed the drive toward the plant where Manny Zapeto hailed him:

"Hey, Amos! Go look at the boiler. No one else is here yet, and I can't find nothing wrong."

"What's supposed to be?"

"Well, smell the smoke!"

"Oh, that! That's just the way the air smells on cold nights."

Amos went up to the drivers' room to change and found Lew Barchi sitting at Carly Groce's desk with a route book in front of him. "Sorry! Didn't know you were here."

"Going over my book," Lew said. "Picked up a lot of customers in the last month, an' I gotta figure a better way to deliver 'em. Go on, change; don't mind me." And he added as Amos began to undress methodically, "The boys downstairs chipper about their raises?"

"Chipperer than the drivers, I guess."

"Uh! . . . How do they feel about the bonus business?"

Amos looked up sharply. "I don't know that they do feel."

"Well, maybe they'd be open to persuasion?"

Amos only scowled.

"I—uh—guess you remember a little business we did last summer, out of which Steve and I got mighty little?"

"I didn't get much myself," Amos said cautiously.

"Some of my boys are getting plenty fed up. Pretty soon—week or two, maybe—we'll be sending a committee to Thomas. No rough stuff. We're going at it different this time. But I been thinking: it'd be nice if the creamery did some belly-aching about the same time—enough to make the office think twice 'fore it said No."

"Yeah," Amos said. "That'd probably suit you fine."

"Might be something in it for the creamery. Interested?"

"Me? What could I do? You want to talk to Larry."

"Who do you think you're kidding?"

Amos slipped out of his pants and reached for his coverall.

Lew said, "You owe me something."

"The hell I do! See Larry. Lousing things up is his line."

"You won't play ball then?"

Amos stamped into his boots, gathered his good clothes and started for the door. "I guess not, thanks."

It was hard to trust Barchi when the cripple had needlessly lied about a little thing like going over his route book. It was Ben Goetz's book that he had had in front of him. Ben kept a broad red rubber band around one metal cover to hold notes, orders, and the like, and this had not been quite concealed by the man's arm. . . .

Outside, the odor of smoke seemed stronger, and Amos stepped onto the drive to take an instinctive look at the creamery roof; but there was

nothing to see. Nor did a glance around at the other buildings show anything alarming. The cows in the lower barn seemed restless, that was all; he could hear the clatter of stanchions, an occasional protesting bellow.

He shrugged uneasily and went inside to join the gang which had arrived while he was dressing.

Ihloff, working on the platform, was witness to the event when it occurred. The noise from the barn had become so great that it could no longer be ignored, and he was staring directly that way, muttering, "Hey, what goes on?" when the broad door at the end opened suddenly and cattle erupted. An instant later flame mushroomed through the peak of the roof. His jaw sagged, but for long seconds no sound emerged.

Then he yelled.

The creamery gang came fast, but halted in paralyzed awe. A pillar of flame, sparks, and smoke shot straight into the still air, volcanolike, from the spot where the fire had burst through; overhead, it spread flatly into a dense, black, orange-streaked cloud. Snow and near-by buildings were bathed in an almost steady crimson glare in which awkward, clumsy cows bucked madly in a weird dance, slipping and falling on the icy crust, yet seeming to play some joyous, fantastic game.

Amos sucked in his breath and yelled at Larry: "Get to the office and call the fire department. Tell the buggers to hurry. That barn's not going to wait!"

As he leapt off the dock with the rest of the gang at his heels, he knew the firemen would be too late. The blaze had had a long start, cooped up in the hayloft; now that there was a draft through, it would burn fast. There might be a chance to save the animals, but little else.

He found the milkhouse locked. Backing off, he hurled himself against the door; at the third try, wood split, and it burst inward. Beyond was the door to the barn itself, unlocked but yielding only a few inches to pressure. The rank smell of animals came through the crack and when he thrust in an arm he felt hair and warm skin. He tried to prod the cow away, but others must have been jammed against her, for the prod brought a surging reaction that pinched the door on his arm. Retreating from the milkhouse, he wondered how the cows had got loose.

Every house on the place was ablaze with excited lights; in the lurid glare he could see people running toward the barn from all directions. He knew they were running, though in the camera-flash impression of the moment, they seemed motionless.

The big door at the end of the barn was jammed with bawling, straining, panicky animals. Manny Zapeto, Max Mann, and Kenny Ihloff were prancing in front of them, trying to entice them into the open; but they were creamery boys, unused to cows and afraid of them, and were only frightening them further.

Max shouted at him, "Someone's inside there. I seen him. I heard him. The poor bastard'll never get out!"

A cow broke from the jam, bucking and bellowing, and the three scattered and fled.

Amos bawled, "You doin' no good there—come on!" and raced for the feed room. This time he got in without trouble.

Someone shouted, "You want the place to fall in on you? Come back, you crazy—" The voice was lost in other noises.

Amos reached the sliding door into the barn, pushed it open, found the near alleyway clear. The electric lights were out; but moonlight and the glare of flames made rectangles of color on the black walls against which the silhouettes of tossing heads and rearing bodies made the wild patterns of a nightmare. A thin, gagging drift of smoke, thickened by feed dust, hung over a scene of brute terror. The noise was terrible; the frightened bawling of animals, jostling and fighting, was almost lost in the blasting roar of flames from overhead. The tremendous draft carried smoke and heat upward, but it was literally tearing the roof off.

How many minutes did they have? Or was it only seconds?

Manny gulped, "Holy damn, Amos, I'm scared!" He was alone at Vliet's elbow; the others had not followed.

"Come on. We'll clear that door. Use the stalls."

Someone was in the center aisle, on the fringes of the press, trying to pull it apart with his hands. They could hear his voice with curious clarity, pleading, swearing, sobbing hysterically: "They'll come. Somebody'll come. They got to. They can't let 'em burn. Aw, hurry! Hurry! I can't do it alone. Get back there, you goddam, blasted— Please. Please come."

It was Dick Flemhos, and though the animals nearest him were almost calm in the midst of panic, he was in the wrong place; too far from the door. Amos and Manny had a better chance.

Standing in the stalls where there was some protection, Amos laid hands on a cow, yanked her around, and shoved her up the alley to Manny, who said, "Jesus! the damn thing kicked me—" but chased her on. Amos grabbed an ear, jerked another head around.

Dick was shouting to them to hurry, get through to the door, loosen

them up, not let them get hurt. He himself was getting dangerously deep in the surging mass. Amos yelled and waved him back.

Amos sweated, strained, dodged butting heads and kicking heels and heavy, bony bodies, booted cow after cow into Manny's hands. Down at the corner they were jammed solidly around the cement installations. There'll be broken legs there sure as hell, he thought; and if there are the lot of us'll be blocked in. There was already a fluid swaying jam between himself and the feed-room door.

Someone who knew how was helping from outside, and Mickey Pratt was suddenly beside him, saying: "God damn! What a mess! Who the hell let 'em all loose?"

Dick heard and cried: "Me! I thought they'd go out. All I thought of was getting the stanchions loose so they'd have a chance. I never thought they'd jam up. I ought to of known."

Back in the building a shower of sparks fell, and an animal bawled and stampeded. Amos was sobbing as hysterically as Dick, begging, pleading, swearing in the same breath. A hot coal fell on his neck, and he took a swift look overhead. Lines of orange showed between the boards of the loft floor, a molten, white orange that sent down waves of heat in spite of the fierce draft. Smoke and fumes were beginning to make the air acrid and hard to breathe. Sparks were falling more frequently, in little showers, but the floor was not yet ready to come down. Still, if the roof collapsed on top of it . . .

There was no telling the state of the roof.

Amos shot a desperate glance over the milling cattle through the open door to the coolness and safety outside. People stood in a distant ring, and, even through a mist of falling sparks and ash, he could recognize them in the rich, red light and read their expressions. Frenzied animals scattered them repeatedly, but the circle re-formed like a reflection in disturbed water.

A cow, bursting loose, charged straight away from the barns, tail flying, and three others, freed by her escape, stood stock-still looking surprised until Donny Ochs struck at them with a fork; then they fled, and others, finding themselves loose also, followed. Suddenly there was a surge inside the barn. The center aisle cleared with a rush amid excited bellows and squalls of pain from those bruised against the doors. The side aisles emptied more slowly, jostling and slipping at the corners; but the jam was broken, and the animals were all moving in one direction at last. The boys hazed them along while Dick and Amos sought to round up the stragglers deep in the blazing barn.

An impatient group yelled and gesticulated in the doorway: "That the last? . . . Then let's git! . . . Hurry!"

But Flemhos grabbed at them. "The calves! The calves in the wing!"

Max yelled: "Come on. Nothin' left of the roof—ready to go." Others said: "To hell with the calves. We done all we can."

Amos looked up. The cracks had widened perceptibly, and the heat was scorching. Some timbers already sagged. Still, the calves were in the upper wing, under a different loft.

"O.K., come on! Let's see, anyway!" And he raced for the feed room. More than one pair of feet followed.

Once in the feed room, they were reassured. The wing was dark, cooler, only a little smoky, and the roar of flames was not as great.

Amos vaulted into the first pen, grabbed an armful of bawling, kicking calf and passed it out to Mickey. "Use the top door, not the one in the feed room. Somebody open it for him. Hurry!"

Dick raced past up the long aisle, and Mickey followed. There were two other calves in the same pen. Amos snagged one, passed it to Donny Ochs, chased the other endlessly, caught it, carried it out himself.

The cold outside surprised him, and he was suddenly tired. The crowd was shouting warnings and pointing. Looking up, he saw that the wooden superstructure at the end of the main barn had tilted inward, the loft of the calf barn was blazing furiously. He knew it might go when the main barn did—but then again it might not. He went back inside, and as he did so heard fire engines wailing up from the State Road.

Dick was opening pen doors wildly, and Amos grabbed him by the shoulder, shook it. "Want to make the same mistake twice? Take 'em one at a time! Catch 'em, carry 'em out! You want hell loose in here?"

He slammed the doors shut, but one calf was already in the alleyway. Donny, coming from the far end carrying another, stumbled over her and almost fell. Amos tried to catch her, missed, and she fled toward the feed room. He tripped Dick when he tried to follow. "You'll chase her into the fire! Leave her! The heat'll drive her back."

"Lucy Pride's calf! Worth plenty. We got to get her!"

The prize cow meant nothing to Amos. "Let her alone till we can drive her toward the door. Come on, get the rest first."

The terrified beasts were hard to catch, harder to handle. The larger ones had to be led. The one that was loose, apparently mad, chased up and down, getting in the way, bumping and tripping them when they had their arms full, eluding them when they tried to catch her. Amos,



Mick, and Donny wrestled calf after calf outside while Dick caught them.

The fire engines had finally arrived.

A hot draft, blowing in from the main barn, brought so much smoke and gas that it became hard to breathe. Overhead the ceiling began to gape and shower sparks. In the feed room, a beam fell flaming.

There were two more pens.

"Two more loads apiece!" Amos yelled. "Hurry, goddam it!"

A fireman appeared, ordering them out, and they obeyed, carrying a calf apiece—all but Dick. The fireman went after him, and they could hear him hollering, "Hey, you! Come on. Want this roof down on you?"

It was stifling. Dick, waiting with a calf in his arms, gasped painfully. Donny took it, stumbled away.

Ignoring the fireman and stolidly resisting his efforts to push them out, Amos and Mickey waited, eying the sparks that showered from above, the straw and bedding that began to blaze farther down the barn. The loose calf raced up and down, bawling with pain and terror. Amos had a chance at it, but missed.

Dick passed a calf to Mickey, who started for the door.

The fireman was swearing at them, pulling at Amos's shoulder.

Dick caught the last calf in the last pen and passed it out. Amos took it and ran, but at the door paused to look back. Dick was in the alleyway, struggling with the fireman.

"Hey, Dick—for God's sake! Come on."

*"The calf!"*

The fireman's face was strained and his mouth gaped for breath. "Go on. I got him. I'll handle him."

Dick cried: "Wait! One more. Our best calf, there—worth money!"

Amos bawled: "Leave it. We done damn well to get all but one out!"

The fireman shouted: "Beat it yourself! I can handle this guy!"

There was a dull thud, as of a great weight settling, and then a rumbling sound. Amos yelled: "Jesus! It's going. Come on, come on!"

With the calf in his arms, there was nothing he could do. He ran for the door while crashing walls and rafters thundered in his ears. Outside, he dropped the calf, booted it toward safety, and turned around. A curtain of sparks and flame rose where the main barn had been. The feed room was gone, but only part of the calf wing.

Racing back to the door, he met the fireman struggling out, an arm across his face. Amos grabbed him, pulled him into the open. There was no one else.

"Where's Dick? The other guy? Said you could handle him! Where—"

Through scorched lips, the fireman mumbled, "He got away from me—ran after that damn calf!"

"Whyn't you stop him? God, man—*Jesus!*"

"Tried," the man said. In spite of the wild light, he looked livid.

More timbers crashed, and Amos backed slowly away from the heat. The excitement of danger had flushed out of him. Till now, the fire had not meant much; fighting to get the cattle out had been fun of a sort.

It wasn't any longer.

A heap of damp, charred ensilage where the silo had burst and fallen still smoked lazily; but the rest of the gutted, blackened building was cold and frozen. Icicles hung from the iron stanchions, from the heavier rafters that had not been completely consumed; ice was gray on the cement stalls and the eight-foot block walls that still stood.

Firemen and police worked in the ruins of the feed room, and a few farm people watched from the blank, white window openings. Among these, Mickey Pratt was staring somberly at the wreckage, waiting. When presently Charlie Dann came out on the office stoop, he drifted that way.

Charlie was mopping his face with a handkerchief, but there was a tight smile on his lips. "Didn't even say I-told-you-so! They said it for me. They said Dick should have been fired long ago."

"They think he set it, then?"

"What else was he doing up there? Ah-h, there'll be red tape—the cops are talking about an inquest—but, hell, they know what happened. They ought to be thankful the little rat's dead and let him rest. He wasn't worth the fuss they're making."

"He did a job getting the cows out," Mick said.

Charlie did not hear. His lips were twisted, and a note of triumph crept into his voice. "Ed crawled! Said right out he'd been wrong and I'd been right. Some day people'll know I don't talk through my hat! Perhaps they'll listen next time and take my word."

"Dick did his best to get the cows out. But it's a funny thing—knowing how he was about them—that he started the fire before turning 'em loose. I can't figure it."

"How could he? If he'd turned 'em out first, somebody'd 've seen 'em and asked questions before he could light a match."

"Then it's funny he burned the place at all." Mickey set Charlie walking, guided him gently up the drive.

The barn manager said irritably: "It ain't either! He thought all he had to do was unfasten 'em and they'd walk out like they do to pasture. Only they didn't. They stampeded. He didn't know 'em as well as he thought."

Mick said, "What bothers me most is *why* he did it."

"Oh-h—I been riding him. Guess he wanted to get back at me."

"How did burning the barn hurt you?"

Charlie waved a vague, impatient hand. "Aw, the guy's crazy! Maybe he thought it'd get me in bad with the office. You can't tell. He was nuts." The explanation trailed into silence and there was a gap.

"You certainly got answers to all the questions."

Two men emerged from the ruins of the feed room carrying a wicker basket between them. Charlie drew a sharp breath, and halted in his tracks. As Mickey watched, his face drained white, then green. Veins stood out on his temples, the muscles of his jaw ridged up, and his throat began to work; but he could not drag his eyes away until the doors of the morgue's car had closed on the grim company. Then, realizing suddenly that he was being watched, he pulled himself together, and achieved an unsightly grimace.

"Nasty, uh?"

"Poor damn guy!" Mickey said. "You know, I been wondering what the inquest 'll say about it all? I guess, if Dick set it, that'd make it practically suicide. . . . But how about it if they find some other guy set it? What 'll it be then? Just an accident? Or manslaughter? Or murder? Or what?"

Charlie snarled: "Murder! What you talking about? Of course not! . . . All the damn-fool ideas!" He ran a hand over his forehead and walked off abruptly.

## PART IV

### I

JAKE LARSEN swung to the wrong side of the street more sharply than was necessary, just to see if the new truck would slide on the ice. It did, its wheels clicking against the curb with a jar hard enough to stagger him, and Jake drew to a stop, muttering about the chains the farm made him use. Damned things were like runners.

It had been sleeting for twelve hours, leaving walks and roads solid sheets of slipperiness, and Jake was wary, stepping from the truck. He held wide the two quarts of B he was delivering, ready to toss them away in case he slipped. Bad business, falling with glass bottles in your hand. It was slow work, running a route on days like this. He might not get back before dark, he thought disgustedly; and, returning to his truck, he tried running and sliding. It was little faster but more fun.

He worked at his coated windshield a minute, then got into the stand-drive; cut to his own side of the street without looking and speeded up to climb the gentle slope ahead. Beyond it, the street went down steeply to river level, then rose to the bridge. At the bottom he had to turn right into River Road, but it never occurred to him to slow down at the crest of the hill.

A cop on the corner shouted, and the driver's foot touched the brake; but when the truck started to skid he took it away again and let her ride. What the hell! It was safer this way.

Another street came in at a sharp angle, and from it, ahead of him, shot a boy on a sled. Jake stood on the brakes this time. The truck's momentum remained unchecked, yet sled and boy sped across and clear, and it was fairly evident his judgment was bad.

The truck's rear end, with slow-motion smoothness, swept to the center of the road. Briefly, the stand-drive skated crabwise down the slope; then the slow swing continued until it was traveling rear foremost. Since the road was slightly crowned, the front wheels presently caught the curb, snapped the rear ones around, and the truck rolled over with the tinny sound of crumpling fenders and the thunderous

crash of loaded milk cases. It moved across the sidewalk on its side at an undiminished rate, tripped an instant on the light wooden rail at the top of the embankment, and teetered.

In that second of hesitation, Jake looked through his windshield straight down—as it seemed to him—into the dark swirling water of the river. Then the glass starred and turned opaque, he heard the slow splintering of wood, saw a loosened board end rip through the roof and the already broken cases toss wildly in a new direction. Glass and milk, gobs of cheese and cartons of butter rained about him. A piece of metal torn from the case rack licked by him and pierced the dashboard. A loose case struck his leg. The truck body leapt out of shape and back again and out of shape once more. It creaked and cracked; daylight showed through the splits.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Jake clung to the wheel. He felt as though he were taking great, involuntary leaps, and each time he came down, his feet slapped the floor plates harder.

The truck rolled down the embankment, gouging it in three places, bounced through the bushes at its foot and across the River Road, ended solidly with its bottom against a big maple on the river's brink. The shock knocked the drive shaft into the body, split the transmission, cracked the block, bent the frame, burst the gas tank, all in the same shattering instant.

Jake lay on his side on a bed of broken glass; and bottles, cases, and dairy products fell about him. Finally the odor of gasoline reached his nostrils, galvanizing him with the thought of fire, and he found suddenly that he could move. The door overhead was jammed, but it never occurred to him to use the rear ones which had burst wide open; he simply crouched, set his shoulders and heaved with the strength of necessity.

An instant later he scrambled out and down, across the River Road onto the scarred embankment, where he paused trembling to look back at the truck which had been new—and his—sixty seconds ago.

God damn, he breathed to himself dully. God damn!

One hand rose uncertainly to wipe blood and milk from his face. He was sore all over. There was cottage cheese in his hair. His clothes were a mess. He felt lousy.

"So you'd call it junk?" the manager said gloomily.

Red Walsh shrugged. "Well, it is! You'll get a junk allowance on it

against a new one—and that's all she's worth. Hell! Put in an insurance claim for full value, and don't even try to repair her."

Ed Thomas said sourly, "I doubt if we're covered."

"Huh?"

"It wasn't fire, theft, liability, or collision, was it? I've a hunch, Red, we're out a cool fifteen hundred bucks. That's a sock to the budget. No doubt it was Jake's fault, is there? I mean—even considering the ice? or this boy on the sled he's yelling about?"

"Nope. There's a cop saw the whole thing. He says the damn fool came over that hill like a ghost from the grave at midnight."

"That cop?" Jake said. "Sure, he hollered at me! I know him. I gave him the sign coming over the hill, and he hollered Hello. Y' mean the sonofabitch says he was flagging me down? The hell he was! He's trying to cover himself, that's all. He knows he shouldn't of let that kid coast on the streets. Why, the lousy— Look! I wasn't going fast. I been telling you that, goddam it! I was taking it easy; I was scared of that ice, see? If it hadn't been for that kid tearing out in front of me— Hell, you didn't want I should kill him, did you? Jesus! I damn near got killed myself trying to save a life, and what happens? I get blamed for driving lousy!"

The hot eyes glared the manager down. The man was angry and sincere, Ed Thomas admitted to himself reluctantly. No matter what had actually happened, Jake remembered it this way.

"All right. But I won't warn you again, Jake; only point out that you cost the farm a lot of money today. Think about it."

The driver's lips formed words at Thomas's retreating back, and Barchi, watching, smiled.

"Look at 'em, trying to blame it on me," Jake muttered. "You heard him: *I* cost the farm money! Jesus Christ! They been after me ever since I came here, Thomas and Walsh; always telling me what a lousy driver I am! Hell, I drive as well as any of you!"

Hack Dunty said, "They'd like you to drive fifteen miles an hour so's you'd finish your route at midnight."

Carly Groce commented, "You both drive like Marx Brothers on the loose."

"Fast driving's not bad driving," Jake began.

And Hack growled: "They should leave us alone. We don't have many accidents. Hell, I worked places where they had one a month and

never yelled. We got a right to finish our routes at a decent time—and we can't do it with governors."

Carly said: "O.K.—but this is twelve or fifteen hundred bucks you guys'll never get. Remember that, next time you holler about wages."

"You ask me," Jake snarled, "it's twelve or fifteen hundred bucks of bonus Ed can't give himself."

Barchi said mildly, "You sore enough to do anything?"

"You damn right!" Jake snapped.

"Well, some of us are trying to work on the management to make 'em see our side. If you two want to help—"

Hack said uneasily, "Me, I don't like to beg trouble."

But Jake said: "I'm with you, Lew. I had enough, damn it. Ed can't talk to me like he did. You put in something about us running our trucks our own way, and I'm with you."

"For how long?" Barchi said.

Jake flushed and started swearing.

## II

THE Roanes' had become the drivers' headquarters; it was private, convenient, and Hal's contribution to the movement. But to Hal's wife it was a trial.

Bet was logy and irritable these days, and the incessant talk and complaint frazzled her nerves. Still, in spite of lack of interest, in spite of preoccupation with herself and her unborn child, she had come to understand almost unwittingly something of the purpose and progress of the tide flooding before her eyes. Its progress was marked by the number that came to the house. Once it had been Lew Barchi alone. Later, there had been Chief Myhychyk, with Bevis making an irregular third; then Tom North had come, and just last week, for the first time, Jake Larsen. Today, Barchi had a new recruit, a surprising one: Ben Goetz.

Barchi was taking an obscure pleasure in kowtowing to him: "Gimme your coat, Ben. Here, take this chair, it's more comfortable. Gentlemen, the big shot at last! Getcha something, Ben? Water? Shot of whisky? You look like you needed it." For Ben was white and subdued, his smile missing, his blue eyes behind their glasses bleak.

They were waiting for Bill Bevis, who was late.

"Where is he?" the Chief said. "He said he'd comè. Why ain't he here? Y' know, I don't like that guy—"

Barchi said: "Bill's O.K.—not a hundred per cent, maybe, but he'll support a lot of what we want. We're lucky he'll do that much. After all, what'll a relief man get out of this? He's with us just 'cause we've had the dirty end of the stick—so why should we gripe about his being late sometimes."

"I do' know. Bill kids too much. Laughs all the time so's you can't tell what he's thinking. He could be Ed's spy."

They were at it again, Bet thought: an absentee was sure to be raked over for signs of weakness. Even Barchi had come in for it. She wondered if they suspected how much mutual mistrust existed.

When she listened again, the Chief was talking about Hack Dunty: "He's a cagy damned rascal. Wants to see which side's gonna win before he jumps. Well, damn it, let's make him jump! We been waiting months for these other guys to get sore. Do we have to sit around months more waiting for Hack, too?"

Barchi said: "Well, we got a majority, seven out of eight. How about sending a committee to Thomas this week?"

It took them in the wind. They had talked of this whenever they were together, but always in terms of "when" and "if." Now Barchi said "this week," and Bet sensed their reluctance to face decision. Marty Myhychuk's "Yeah—sure, chief!" lacked his usual explosive assurance and fell weakly into the silence of the rest.

Jake asked doubtfully, "What'd they see him about?" He sounded scared. A weak sister, Bet thought. The other day he had been ready for anything, but already he was tepid.

"That's up to you guys. Or maybe you'd rather just go on talking!"

Barchi's sneer brought the response he wanted, and there were a few suggestions. The discussion was laggard at first but gained warmth as the idea of action took hold; yet, to Bet's mind, it was talk wasted, for they had already thrashed out their grievances time and again.

Barchi was equally impatient. "Blast it," he said finally, "we been over all this. Remember we figured out, if we asked Thomas for the works, we'd just get kicked out? Remember we decided to pick one thing—something he might say Yes to, but not too damned piddling either—and concentrate on that—hard?"

Tom said, "What you got in mind, Lew?"



"I been arguing since fall we should ask for a salesman."

They had been over that too, endlessly, but Bet listened while they dragged out once more every argument pro and con. Lew Barchi argued it down the line and won his point.

The Chief growled, "So what do we do when he turns us down?"

Barchi shrugged. "Try for something else."

"Hell, if this is our best chance and it don't work, what will? I say to hell with it! If he says No, let's get tough—"

"Look, Chief. There'll be no getting tough, whether he says No once or a dozen times."

"But I tell you, you gotta talk to Ed with a gun in your hand!"

"Until every damned driver including Dunty and"—elaborately—"our good friend Ben here believes that and wants to risk it, we'll leave our guns at home. And even then we'll think twice!"

Bet wondered if he meant it. It was barely possible, she thought; and then laughed at herself for believing it. But when conservative Tom North had joined the group, ripe for action, Lew and Hal had talked him into a milder mood. So there *had* been a change in them; they were more serious, less vicious than they once had been. Perhaps, she thought wryly and only half seriously, they had convinced themselves with their own reasoning.

At any rate Lew Barchi had silenced the opposition. He said: "O.K. then. If we got that straight, there's only one thing left: to pick who'll go to Thomas. Two guys should be enough. How about Tom and Ben?"

The Chief said, "Hell, Lew! You should be one."

"Nope. Ed and Pettitt don't like me. But Tom and Ben, they worked here a long while; they're not soreheads or troublemakers and aren't connected in Ed's mind with strikes or anything. He's got a guilty conscience about Tom too, and that won't hurt any. I figure it's the best move we could make."

It might be, too, Bet mused; but it was odd Lew would let a vital part of his plan pass from his own control.

Tom said: "Hell, Lew, I'm no talker, but— Well—if the rest of you want me to try—"

But Ben said: "Not me. I'm not in this."

"For a fellow in your shoes," Barchi answered, "that's an awful flat piece of talking."

Ben whitened. The other drivers looked at the two in surprise.

"Reconsider?" Barchi asked.

"I—suppose." Ben sounded stifled. "If the rest want me to."

There was no hearty agreement in this, and Tom looked as if he yearned for stronger support; but there was no outright dissent.

"So now it's a question of when," Barchi continued.

Tom said, "Me, I'd like to start 'fore I lose my nerve."

"O.K. then: you and Ben fix a day and go at it."

There was a general movement to break up just as a car drove into the yard. Jake Larsen, who was in a position to see, said, "Here comes Bill, now that the excitement's over."

Bill Bevis came in to find them shrugging into their overcoats. He grinned wickedly and began shrugging out of his. "Hey, you're going the wrong way!" the Chief said.

"O.K., have your laugh, boys. Make it good, 'cause it'll be the last. I been around town listening for dirt, and I got some. Guess what." He flung it at them without further warning: "Eastern Dairies is moving in."

The kidding stopped. "Hell, we heard that before!" Barchi said.

"Fact. Chalk it up, you chiselers: Monday February 3rd—two weeks from today!" Their expressions set him giggling.

The Chief said, "Hell, you're kidding!"

"Look in the papers Wednesday. Full-page announcement—just for a start. They're coming in with advertising, five trucks, and ten salesmen; and what they'll do to the dairies in this town 'll be a shame."

"Holy Jesus!" Jake said. "Five trucks and—" He sat down slowly.

Barchi looked at Hal, and he sounded tired. "What a break! Just as we get our ducks in a row, what happens!"

There was a dispirited movement toward the chairs that had been vacated. Bet, only vaguely uneasy, watched their faces, frowning.

Tom North sighed. "Well, Ben, this saves us work. I guess nobody'll worry now about wages and hours. It'll be a fight holding our jobs."

Ben did not answer. Neither did anyone else. Bevis began chuckling again. "Hit you, didn't it? O.K. But we got two weeks to work in, to get solid with our customers. That's plenty of time. Stop in an' see 'em, brush up on your service, do 'em favors—"

"What's the good?" the Chief demanded.

"Oh, hell! We hafta make a fight of it."

Jake Larsen said: "Why? Place this size can't buck Eastern Dairies. Look what they got behind 'em. This two-by-four outfit—"

The flurry of whining sobered Bevis. "Hey, look. Snap out of it! You can't quit before you start. We're not licked. Hell, Lew, *you're* not scared, are ya?"

Barchi pulled himself together with a visible effort. "Of Eastern Dairies? Hell, no! They won't take customers away from me. I got 'em, and I can keep 'em. But it's too damn bad it came up now!"

"'At's a talk!"

The Chief said: "Wait till the bastards start on you, Lew! I'm telling you: those big companies know price-cutting dodges."

"They don't have to," Ben Goetz said. "They got the paper bottle. The Control Board lets you sell milk a cent cheaper that way. And a cent difference 'll take my whole route."

Bevis said: "I'll talk to Thomas. Maybe we can use the paper bottle too. Anyway, I'll get you some literature on the glass ones."

"Why?" the Chief asked. "It won't do any good."

They were digging themselves a hole, Bet thought. She said as much to her husband later, when the men had drifted off; but he shook his head, looking tight-lipped and white.

"Talking about how bad it'll be is no good. But don't kid yourself! It'll be tough enough. You'll find out."

"What do you mean? How?"

Hal shrugged. "Take me ten years instead of five to pay for that brat of yours." He looked at her with cold dislike. "God, you're big!"

She smiled gently. "Want to feel him move? Come here."

"Nuts!" He started to add something, hesitated, finally said, "You ever think what it'll be like when—when the time comes?"

Bet was puzzled by his expression, which seemed to be one of disgust or revulsion. "Oh, sure. Sometimes."

"You scared?"

"A little, maybe. I guess every girl is. But most of us go through it; so I guess it's not so much."

"Not so much?" There were white patches at the corners of his nose. "I guess you never been around while it was happening, huh? Well, I was. I *heard* it happening once—and believe me, it's a hell of a business. . . . I knew plenty about it before that too."

"What?"

"Never mind. But damned if I can see how girls can face it months on end and not go crazy. What if you died?"

"I won't. The doctor says I was born to have babies."

"That's what they tell them all."

Bet smiled placidly, her eyes looking contentedly to the future.

It had melted all day Wednesday, and Ben Goetz came home soaked with slush and dog-tired. He threw the local paper with the bad news in it on the bench in the hall, crawled out of his wet coverall and the heavy sweater he wore beneath it, and dragged himself wearily to the sofa. Sonia came from the kitchen to sit beside him.

"Ben, I heard something today. I don't know if it's true—"

"Yeah—it is." He thought she meant Eastern Dairies.

"Then you did go to a drivers' meeting?"

Silence. His eyes opened, and he stirred uneasily. "Well—yeah."

"Why? Oh, Ben—you couldn't. You're not on their side. Why?"

"Had to. Anyway, maybe I am—about some things."

"Oh, a few, yes. We all are! But you don't believe in their way of getting them; you don't believe in force, Ben."

"Not going to use it."

"Could Lew Barchi get into an argument and not end up using it?"

"He won't have anything to do with it. He won't be there."

"Who will?" The conviction hit her at his first hesitation. "Ben!"

"Yeah," he said. "Me and Tom."

"No! . . . No, Ben—they're using you! They're making you two the—the front—the respectable front—for something—"

"Yeah. I know."

"Then why—"

"I—had to."

"You keep saying that, but it doesn't mean anything—"

"It means I had to." He rubbed a tired hand across his face. "Barchi found out I was breaking Milk Control Board rules."

"Control Board rules! Ben! What—"

"Nothing much. There's this—woman down in Millville. She needs milk badly and can't afford it. I've been practically giving it to her, paying the difference from my own pocket."

"But how could Lew find out about that?"

"I don't know."

Sonia frowned, then passed it off. "What can the Board do to you?"

Ben shrugged. "Not much. Ed Thomas might fire me. Chiefly, it wouldn't be good for the farm. They'd get fined, and there'd be a public stink. Besides—some people might read—other things into it, and that wouldn't be so good for you."

"Never mind me! You can't surrender to them."

"I been trying to tell you, hon; it's all off anyway, for a while—maybe

for always. Depends what Eastern Dairies do to us. I guess you hadn't heard they're moving in. It's all in the paper." He motioned wearily. "Page 6 if you want to look at it."

Sonia was dazed, and it was a moment before she could rise and get the paper. There was a full-page advertisement, and she read the lead aloud: "On Monday February 3rd, Eastern Dairies brings its famous Golden Guernsey to your city . . ." Her eyes skimmed the rest. Then she sat down on the bench and was thankful it was there.

The news hit her almost as hard as it had hit the drivers; but her reaction was quicker and quite different. Almost at once she was asking, "What'll the farm do?"

"What can they do?"

"They won't sit and take it quietly, will they? They'll fight? And—oh, Ben, you'll fight too, won't you, whether the rest do or not?"

"Honestly, hon—what chance have I got? They're going after my Millville territory hardest of all because money counts down there. They'll take my whole route away."

"You won't even try! Oh, Ben, sometimes I could—I could—"

She almost said it—it was the closest she had ever come; but she bit her tongue in time and fled hastily to the kitchen.

Sonia must have been the last to hear. The news had spread as only bad news can, and by Wednesday night there was no other topic.

Reactions were varied. The less foresighted were actually pleased, on the theory that the farm deserved all it got, realizing only belatedly that what the farm suffered, they suffered too. In general, people were gloomy. Red Walsh even came to the manager to ask about canceling the order for the truck replacing Jake's smashed one.

"It'd save you that twelve hundred—and we'll need it more'n the truck, maybe. Anyway, if we hafta drop a route, we won't need one."

Ed stared. "Drop a route? Why should we? If you mean Eastern Dairies, why, they're nothing to worry about. They can't hurt us. They're no supersalesmen. They've no superproduct. Now listen, I want no more of that talk."

He was surprised and shocked, for Eastern Dairies' coming had not worried him appreciably and he could not see why it did the farm; he had faith in the business he had built. This was a headache, yes, but the milk business was full of them. It was a long hard job building routes from scratch in this town, and Eastern Dairies would find it no easier than he.

"Why, our dealers have been bucking them in the metropolitan area for three years and expanding all the time," he said to Pettitt.

"Our dealers haven't bucked the kind of sales campaign they'll try here, mister. If I were you, I wouldn't risk being caught by it. I'd parallel it, ad for ad."

Ed snorted: "That'd bankrupt us in short order. What we could afford'd only look feeble and funny—be money wasted; and if you *are* right, we'll need that money."

Pettitt shrugged. "If you don't show fight of some sort, this place'll jitter itself to pieces under your feet."

The ad in Wednesday's paper was only the start. It was followed by a trickle of cartoons, four to six scattered daily through the paper, small, inconspicuous, but cumulatively effective. Then there was a second full-page layout on Sunday the 26th, and as luck would have it, Weyland Meadows' regular monthly double half-column was directly opposite: a sedate, uninspired squib about sunshine vitamins, children's diets, and dark winter days. It looked juvenile in both content and size.

On Monday the local billboards blossomed with a rash of Golden Guernsey posters, and the farm, already shaken, began to dither. The daily cartoons continued, became larger and more frequent. On Wednesday, Eastern Dairies literature came to every street address and rural-route boxholder in the area. Including the farm.

After supper that night, Swan Ellis said, "Still think they can't hurt us, Ed?"

"I don't think Eastern Dairies can, no." The manager was stubborn; but he added reluctantly: "I'm not so sure we can't hurt ourselves. For some reason our spirit seems to be shot."

"It is," Swan said flatly. "Right now—five days before the fight starts—we're licked. If we don't do something, we'll take the shellacking of our lives."

"Well—hardly! . . . Though I admit the drivers are funking it—all but Barchi—and I did count on them. But what can I do? Even Whart admits now that we couldn't keep up with their advertising—and we've only seen the start. Besides, it's too late to get anything effective into print—or into the mails."

"Forget the papers. We can't compete there, no. Forget the mails and the billboards. What we want is something inexpensive and aimed at the farm, not at the customers."

"Ye-es, but—"

"Get the department heads in, have them get their boys to work. Offer

prizes for ideas. Keep their minds—and their hands—busy. Get 'em so interested they'll forget to be scared."

"But what—"

"A parade. The farm fleet all decked out with streamers and bunting—the big trucks made into floats—banners, signs, flags—throw out souvenirs of some kind. You get the whole place working on the details, the ideas, the building. Then run the procession through the downtown streets Saturday afternoon."

Thomas wrinkled his nose. "Mean getting a permit. And we'd run into bad weather sure as anything; there might be an accident. Anyway, winter's no time for a parade. People can't stand and watch it, and those that are in it freeze to death." He made a gesture of dismissal. "A flop 'd be worse than nothing. . . . If the drivers would only work on the customers, it'd be a lot more effective than circus methods."

He received a scattering of other suggestions. The chicken department wanted to give every customer a dozen eggs on Monday morning, and Oz Tatum wanted the barn and farm boys to gang up and run Eastern Dairies salesmen out of town as fast as they came into it. Only one idea appealed momentarily, and this was Amos Vliet's suggestion that the manager consult with other local dairies with an eye to mutual protection. This he seriously considered until someone suggested that it would look as though Weyland Meadows were panicky.

In short, nothing at all was done; and as the days ticked by, and Eastern Dairies' campaign intensified, Ed Thomas felt a fatalistic inertia. At this late date, unless he could think of something brilliant— Then too, at bottom, he still believed that they could not be hurt. It was discouraging to those who still wanted to fight, and the farm's morale coasted downhill with the increasing speed of a runaway sled.

On Thursday the papers carried Eastern Dairies' third big advertisement, and there was a front-page story as well.

On Friday a miniature linen diaper came through the mails, properly folded and pinned in front with a safety pin in the shape of a tiny token bottle of milk. On the diaper was printed: "ANNOUNCING . . . our Pride and Joy . . . arriving February 3rd . . . EASTERN DAIRIES' FAMOUS GOLDEN GUERNSEY." It was smart advertising, the farm told itself; by Monday the whole city would be anticipating the new arrival and would no doubt welcome it with open arms.

Nor was the campaign over. The next shot was aimed squarely at Weyland Meadows, a letter to Larry Ochs from his brother Steve. It read in part:

"I thought you should be warned. We're coming after you all out, and some of the boys here feel it'll be easy pickings. I hope not for your sake and Donny's, but I know what kind of fight this E.D. bunch puts up. And no one knows better than me, I guess, what kind of competition W.M. is likely to offer.

"We just finished over at Moulton—maybe you heard? Since fall, when we went in, we broken two of the locals flat. Well, you'll have to fight the same sales crew that did that, and our paper bottle gives us an advantage you can't meet. You want me to find places for you and Donny here in case worse comes to worst? Maybe I could. I don't know."

There was more of the same: Eastern Dairies was pouring five thousand into advertising, with another five later if necessary; it was throwing in six trucks and twenty salesmen; it expected to fill these first routes within a month and would put on four more during March and April.

"They figure W.M.'s the dairy to beat," Steve wrote. "They'll sock it to you, run you out of town, if they can."

Naturally Larry did not keep the letter to himself.

On Saturday afternoon, under a mild beaming sun, Eastern put on the parade that Ed had turned down. It came in with a fleet of twenty gayly colored stand-drives, four big floats, two brass bands, and was officially welcomed by the Mayor and Council at a reviewing stand.

This made a news story for Sunday's paper; there was a fourth full-page advertisement besides, and four pages of pictures and advertising in the rotogravure. To Weyland Meadows, that paper looked like nothing but Eastern Dairies in capital letters from one end to the other.

The farm people said little about it. There was little to say, and nothing at all to do but wait grimly for what was to be.

Monday proved a bright, mild day, perfect for canvassing, and the local men met the brilliant red-and-white Eastern Dairies trucks at every corner. The salesmen, natty and trim in fitted uniforms—instead of coveralls—were everywhere. They made a point of crossing the Weyland Meadows routes and riding the Weyland Meadows drivers: "Why the long face, brother?" "How you like it in the big league?" "That a sheet you're wearing—or a pair of gunny sacks? Don't call it a uniform, I hope!" "That milk or bluing you're delivering?"

The route men, unable to answer, took the ribbing in sullen silence and dodged their tormentors when they could. They began to drop customers here and there, and found many waverers who told them how



polite and nice the other salesmen were, how smart they looked, how convincing their talk was.

Its being a first-of-the-month collection day was no help either.

They delivered their routes and came home, a licked bunch.

On Tuesday an advertisement recounted Eastern Dairies' initial successes. Ed pointed out that it must have been written long before any results could be known; but no matter when it was written, the farm felt, it was close to the truth. People felt too bad even to talk.

It was midafternoon Wednesday before there was a glimmer of reaction. Then Bevis gathered the drivers together and, with pencil in hand, asked each how many customers had been lost.

"Ed wants to know how we stand," he said. "Now, I been on Barchi's route today. He hasn't lost any—like he said he wouldn't! . . . How many you lost, Jake?"

"I ain't lost any either," Jake said. "Couple cut their orders a quart or two—probably trying the other stuff—but that's all."

"Ben?"

"I lost twelve. There's some more going. They're after me hard."

Bevis frowned. "Could be worse. Tom?"

"Three."

"Three? Jesus, is that all? . . . How about you, Chief?"

"One."

Bill stared, then asked quietly, "Hal?"

"None."

"Dunty?"

"I lost nine," Dunty said.

Bevis scowled. "You guys kidding? Hell, that's only twenty-five! . . . And Barchi put on fifty in December alone."

"I'll lose more," Ben said. "They're after my territory."

"Yeah, but on three routes there's none gone at all! What you guys been hollering about? I thought you was getting the pants beat off you, the way you bawled. What gives?"

No one answered.

Bevis said, "Jake—for God's sake—how much time you spent on your customers in the last week, anyway?"

"Not—very damned much."

"I'll bet! Have you lifted a hand, even?"

Silence. A surprised, dazed look dawned on some of their faces.

Jake muttered, "You suppose they actually *like* our milk?"

And Myhychyk said suddenly: "Y' know, I bet I could get my cus-

tomers back. She's a pushover for a salesman. Bet I can make her so ashamed of leaving she'll blush all the way down."

And Tom said, "What we been sitting on our rears for anyway?"

Bevis left the budding optimism and reported to Ed Thomas.

The manager merely spread his hands. "I said right along they couldn't hurt us!" Nevertheless, he groped for an explanation. "We're putting out damn good milk, and the customers know it."

Petitt, studying the figures over his shoulder, snorted.

Ed asked stiffly, "What other answer is there?"

The bookkeeper shrugged, wishing he knew.

The farm took the news blankly. A few tried to say that the losses were all that had been expected. Others said: "Wait! This is only the beginning. We'll lose plenty yet!" But the general tone changed. At least there was talk again, lots of it, and the pessimists no longer had the floor to themselves.

Reports from other dairies began trickling in on Thursday, only increasing the mystery. Keystone was taking a real beating. Another small local had lost half its business. Not one was standing off the competition as Weyland Meadows was. Clearly Eastern Dairies was no weaker than had been expected; the farm, on the other hand, was far, far stronger.

Sonia said to Matlock: "But why, Clint? Our milk's not good. It isn't to be compared with Eastern Dairies'. It's probably not as good as Keystone's, consistently, and yet they're suffering far more."

Clint, comparatively new and still able to remember how the dairy had looked to him from outside, said slowly: "Ask yourself why we've grown at all with milk so uneven; why we've grown so steadily and rapidly. Perhaps because the city's proud of us."

"But why? It has no reason to be."

"Well—we've grown. We're the one local dairy that has. And in the metropolitan area as well as here. Local people find our milk up there and say, 'Oh, yes, their plant's in my home town!' and their local pride gets a boost. So they actually believe our milk's better than an outside company could produce, simply because it's a successful home product."

Sonia shook her head as did many another. For people who had been left with no illusions about Weyland Meadows Dairy, its products, and its management, it was hard to grasp that a business of which they had been so openly critical might be considered by the community at large with respect and pride.

No matter what the cause, however, the mere fact that they were holding their own with the big dairy of the East gave the farm and the

drivers in particular a terrific boot, and they went to work with varying success. Myhychyk, without half trying, got back the woman he had lost. Tom got back one of his. So did Ben, though he lost another. Barchi, grasping the local-pride angle more quickly than the rest, went after customers Eastern Dairies had taken from Keystone and resold eleven of them in short order. Hal Roane got two new customers in the same way, and Jake Larsen, learning that the Mayor had changed from Keystone to the newcomers while welcoming them to town, went to City Hall and raised such hell about local products that Weyland Meadows promptly acquired a distinguished customer for four quarts and extras. Jake was jubilant, to put it mildly.

The detailed stories of such triumphs whooped the new enthusiasm. The drivers were suddenly great fellows, and their backs were slapped sore.

By Saturday afternoon an official count proved that, though Ben Goetz's route and Hack Dunty's still lagged, the dairy as a whole had recouped its losses quart for quart; and the news was greeted with a shout.

"Chalk it up!" Barchi crowed at Bevis. "Saturday February 8th: the day we start backing those monkeys out of town!"

This was inevitable in their newborn mood, for they had begun to hate the dairy that had frightened them. Nothing would satisfy now short of complete triumph, and the proposal met with a resounding response on which Barchi promptly capitalized:

"Man, with that salesman we been talking about, we could back those bastards into the river! Tom—Ben—you seen Ed yet?"

Tom too was fired by the vision. "Not yet, no—but we'll do it now, damn it! It's a new talking point, and—and if we *could* get one, we'd ruin those— Ben, whaddaya say? Come on!"

Ben's mood too had changed. He was not ready to follow Tom with enthusiasm; still, proposal, resolve, and action had come so swiftly that he had no time to think or worry. He found himself thinking what a help the salesman would be and hoping, even believing, that the manager—under the circumstances—might see it their way.

"All right. Suppose we get it over."

### III

LEW BARCHI's car, parked near the garage, was visible from the office stoop, and, catching sight of a woman's head through its rear window, its owner paused for a second glance. Then a smile touched his lips, and he walked on slowly across the drive.

At the car door he said: "Hi. Welcome to Barchiville."

Sonia Goetz snapped: "Get in. It's cold. Turn on the heater and drive me around."

She made no pretense of politeness, and it amused him. Once the farm was behind she said: "I'm here because of Ben. You're making him front for your organization, and I won't have it."

"There ain't any organization, so he's not fronting, and 'making' is a nasty word. He was glad to go with Tom."

"Because he was pepped up—as we all are—over the way the drivers are fighting. Just the same, he's not with you fundamentally, and I won't let him represent you. It's my good luck that Ed wasn't in yesterday."

"He will be tomorrow. We fixed it with Pettitt."

"Ben won't be seeing him. We won't yield to—to threats."

"Threats?" There was a pause. "So Ben said I threatened? And after I told him not to. I suppose he told you—the whole truth?"

"He told me he'd broken Milk Control Board rules by giving milk to a poor woman at half-price. Personally, I think it's swell of him!"

Barchi's lips quirked. "He only told you part of it, lady. That woman's not poor. She was on my route once, so I know! That's why I took notice, seeing her name in Ben's book."

"And what were you doing in Ben's book?"

He said blandly, "Trying to get something on him."

"I see." She loaded the words with contempt. "Well?"

"I'd had my troubles with her, see? She's not poor. She's only a girl who rates her virtue at a few quarts of milk—or what have you? Deliverymen all over town are helping her live free."

"If you mean Ben is, that's utterly ridiculous!"

The car slowed, swung into a driveway, backed out, and started toward the farm again. Barchi said dryly:

"Is it? Many's the man who's been driven to that kind by a wife who wouldn't understand him. You sure it hasn't happened to you—remembering your 'tricks'?"

He had the satisfaction of seeing her whiten and hesitate; but then

she said firmly: "I doubt if you believe that yourself. Certainly *I* don't! . . . Anyway, we won't yield to threats."

Barchi's quiet smile disappeared. He said: "There's plenty on this farm will believe it. Can you take the clawing?"

"Yes. Anyway, the whole thing's so—oh, it's so trivial that, even in your blinding hate of me, you must see it'll never be the nasty mess you'd like."

"My hate?" he said on an odd note.

"Of course. Am I to believe you're doing this simply to get Ben into your organization? Nonsense! You hate me because of New Year's Eve. You said then there were ways of getting even that would hurt worse than physical violence. And you found one, didn't you? In fact, you managed to pick the one thing that would hurt me most: the acute lasting torture of seeing Ben tied to your—your gang."

"You got me wrong. I spouted stuff I shouldn't 've that night. Sure: I was drunk. You slapped me down like any woman would 've. Well, on my side there's no hard feelings."

"Aren't there? After I struck so viciously at the one point where it would hurt most? You're not the forgiving kind, Lew Barchi."

"I don't get it," he said slowly.

She had a wild impulse to tell him, feeling that nothing she could say could make him more of an enemy; but innate caution or the lingering hope of a miracle kept her silent, and he urged her no further; perhaps he had understood.

The short ride was ended; they were back at the farm. Barchi drew to a stop at Sonia's home and leaned across to open the door. He said: "Never mind what's behind it. Just remember this: Ben better be at the office tomorrow."

"He won't be."

"That's what you say. Ask him."

"I'll answer for him." She drew a deep, slightly tremulous breath. "If necessary, he'll have to choose. We've frittered away months and years, he and I, squabbling futilely; it's time it came to a head. I—I could almost thank you, Mr. Barchi, for drawing the issue."

The cripple watched her up the walk and into the house. When she had disappeared, a slight convulsive shudder twisted his body. It was some time before he started the car and drove away.

Ben snored softly, regularly, briefly, with a sound like the muffled tear of cotton cloth. The blankets stirred with his breathing, and sometimes he groaned or muttered fretfully in his sleep.

Sonia lay beside him, thinking of him and of Lew Barchi and of the mess she had made of handling the two of them. Even now she was making a mess of it, for after waiting all afternoon and evening for a chance to say what she must, she had let Ben drift to sleep without saying it. Now she must waken him, and she could guess what that would mean.

The mess she had made of handling Barchi was almost as bad. If only she had solved the riddle of his personality a few days—even a few hours—before she had! Before New Year's morning. So much might have been avoided. And it had stared her in the face. It had been there to be seen since the day Lew had taken her on that weird excursion to see his mother and sister and aunt.

Poor Lew! Crippled so that women were not for him while the sex instinct so strong in his family festered within him . . .

And what had she done on New Year's morning but strike that weakness with all the strength she had, laughing at him as a lover and a man!

If only she had guessed earlier! Clearly he had been attracted to her. That excursion which had always puzzled her had been no more or less than a date; his emphasizing of his worst aspects had been bravado, his way of impressing a woman. Yes, she had been his consuming interest in December, even to the exclusion of his organization, the organization which was his usual compensation for a one-sided existence.

If she had guessed, she might have kept him dangling, and saved herself, Ben, and the farm a great deal.

Instead she had laughed, and here was her life at a crisis!

And a crisis over what? A trivial, lying, hate-inspired story!

No—that was superficial. It went deeper.

Rather it was a struggle for Ben's right to believe and act as he chose, something worth fighting for with every weapon she had.

Ah, but dared she use the weapon that was hers?

If Ben chose Barchi, could she abide by the choice?

Every fiber and instinct cried against that. Unhappy as they had often been, life without him would be nothing.

Yet how long could they go on? If the issue were not decided now, must not this struggle be gone through again next week, next month, next year? The moment for choosing must arrive. Why not get it over?

This was the time and the issue. To hesitate was weakness.

Still she made no move to wake him.

She too had a choice. She might say no more, let him plod, let him

be driven; content herself with being forever the wife of a mediocre, hounded milk driver. Perhaps that was the unselfish thing.

She had no more right than Barchi to push him around.

Put that way, it sounded ugly—as though she wanted her own way with no real thought for Ben; but that was not so. What she did, she did for him, and in doing it she courted disaster for herself.

Suppose he said: "I can't face it out, hon; I'm not that kind. If you feel like that, I guess—" And he might say it! Why deceive herself?

Perhaps, if he no longer loved her, he would be glad to.

She had treated him pretty badly sometimes.

If he did say that, was she ready to go? to stick by the decision?

She must be. There was no use bluffing; Ben knew her too well.

She wondered if losing her would seem to him the worse of two evils, and was miserably unsure. It was a gamble, she told herself. Double or nothing on one toss. Well, she had gambled before. It had won her this man beside her, this cold dingy house, this farm, this life she hated . . .

She shivered. What an augury!

So, while minutes crept by, she fought for courage and strength.

"Ben—wake up."

"Uh? Wha's the matter?"

"I want to talk to you, sweet. Wake up. Please."

"Uh-h-h-h . . ."

"Ben!"

"Lemme alone."

"Ben, honey, sweetheart. Please listen to me. I've heard about your going with Tom yesterday, and I've got to talk to you. Seriously, Ben, we can't put it off any longer."

"Pu' what off?"

"An understanding. Oh, Ben, I know you're sleepy! But there's no other time. Tomorrow you're going back to talk to Ed—representing the boys—aren't you?"

"Uh."

"Ben—you can't. That's flat. I won't let you."

"Uh."

"Ben, do you understand what I'm saying? If you insist on going, it'll be the end. It'll mean I—I'll leave you."

"Wh— Wait a minute. Say that again. I—I'm half asleep. I don't get it. What's wrong? What you wake me for? What's this about leaving?"

"If you go to Ed tomorrow representing Barchi, I'll leave you, Ben."

"Ah-h-h-h—"

"I mean it."

"But, hon, I have to. They got this business on me—"

"They haven't. That's bluff. Barchi doesn't want the Control Board in here. Suppose they started investigating other routes, other drivers."

"Ye-ah, but—but, hon, I can't take a chance. It'd be an awful mess for the farm and for me and—and for you—"

"I can stand it. So can the farm."

"People can be awful nasty, hon."

"Ben, I'm not arguing. You and I have argued too long and too often. This had to be. There was bound to come a crisis that would touch the fundamental issue between us—and this is it. Neither of us believes in the things Barchi's planning, neither of us wants to be part of them. But you're willing to be forced, while I won't be."

"Hon, what can I do? I half believe in this salesman—"

"Half believe! Oh, Ben, don't you see that, if you were heart and soul with them, I'd swallow my rebellion and let you have your way? I would, Ben. But I can't and won't see you forced!"

"You *won't*? Is that what you meant by saying you'd leave me?"

"Yes, Ben."

"Hon—"

"What? Why are you hesitating? You want me to go. Is that it?"

"No, Sonia, but I don't know how to keep you. I can't stand up to them. I can't, hon; it's not in me. If you don't love me enough to put up with my weaknesses, why, I guess—"

"Don't say it! Darling, I do love you. Can't you understand how much? Haven't I proved it often? Do you think I want to go? It'll tear my heart out. Honey, kiss me and remember all we've had and can still have—"

". . . Can you still send me away? Darling, we're part of each other. We belong. Don't you see it? Can you imagine life without this closeness, this beauty? Ben, you can't. You want me too much—just as I want you."

"But, hon—"

"Then take courage from me. I love you, Ben. Take my love in your hands and drink of it, and tell Barchi to do his worst. Will you, Ben?"

"Hon, I don't know. I'm confused. This can't be decided this way—"

"Will you, Ben? Please, darling. Promise."

"I don't know. Honestly—"



"What did they want?" Wharton Pettitt looked up as the door closed behind the two drivers and saw the manager dabbing a handkerchief at his forehead. "Made it hot for you, did they?"

"No—not really. They were very decent. . . . They want a salesman." He studied his handkerchief, put it away. "I wish, though—"

"That they'd do something to earn one? Um! That lot couldn't sell milk to a hungry kitten. What did you tell 'em?"

"I stalled. They want an answer, though, by tomorrow or Wednesday—this Eastern Dairies business."

"Very cagy," Pettitt said.

Clint Matlock put in: "It makes sense. If you plan to do it at all—and you do, don't you?—now's the time. Given a little encouragement, they might really go to town against Eastern."

"Given a little encouragement," the bookkeeper said, "their organization will burgeon like Aaron's rod. Ed, the January statement's not finished, but I'm far enough to guess how the milk department's coming out: just about one hundred and twenty-five to the good. How do you like that?"

Ed Thomas winced. "Good Lord, is that all?"

"That's all—thanks to the rise in producer prices and to the creamery raises! How are you going to squeeze a salesman's salary out of it?"

"I don't know. There's always the difficulty of finding a good man on short notice, too—"

"Perhaps the drivers know of one," Clint began.

But Pettitt was impatient. "We're talking around the bush. Let's get to the crux of it. If we turn 'em down—what happens?"

"Oh, they didn't threaten. They told me if I said No, that was O.K. It was my decision. They said they weren't trying to force me, just making a proposition—"

Pettitt snorted. "And trying to set a precedent. You take my advice, and you'll give 'em their salesman when you're damned good and ready, and not one second before. Who's running this place? You or they?"

The manager chewed his lip, torn between conflicting resentments, for he enjoyed the bookkeeper's telling him what to do no more than he did the drivers'. "I wish they'd sent me Barchi and Myhychyk. They'd 've been easier to deal with than these two."

"Smart move. Tom's a good solid man whom we've nothing against: the kind we have to listen to. Their sending in Ben surprised me Saturday, but—"

"Ben," Ed said with a trace of bitterness, "has the unholy knack of

making me feel ashamed of myself by his mere presence. God knows why. I'm as well pleased he didn't come back today. Bevis is probably stronger support for Tom, but he hasn't quite the effect on me that Ben does. It's just as well."

"Um," Petitt said. "I guess it is."

## IV

"WELL, the statement's done," Petitt said. "We're in the red, of course. We always are in January, but it's still not so hot. Tom North's furnace and our generosity with the men certainly show up. And, by the way" (he spoke with an emphasis that meant anything but "by the way"), "what was that ticket in the petty cash marked 'Milk Processing Expense, Labor, ten dollars,' made out in your handwriting and signed by Amos Vliet?" He answered his own question: "You're giving Amos something on the side, aren't you, because he—not Larry—is the one that's keeping things moving downstairs. Well, what if Larry finds out? He's sore already that we don't pay him what Steve got—he's not worth it, naturally; but it won't help the situation if he finds Amos is getting secretly as much as he is. If Vliet's worth it to you, for God's sake, say so and pay it to him outright; stop this under-cover stuff. And what are you trying to do with the boy, anyway? He's only nineteen or twenty, you know. What 've you got in mind?"

Ed said impatiently: "Nothing. I'm only trying to pay him what I think is his just due. Forget it. It's not important."

Petitt grunted his disbelief.

## V

"You sure there's no apple? There was some."

"You drank it. Gee, Charlie, you never useta drink like this. You been drunk all month almost."

"Why not? What else is there? Nobody comes around— A-a-ah, what do I care? This place— Let it go—"

"Charlie—look! We useta go places. We still could—to a movie, at least. Come on: let's."

"Naw."

"Just like that. 'Naw.' 'S like that with everything. So no wonder you don't have fun. And whose fault is it? Drinking, driving your old friends away, so even Mickey never comes any more. You driven 'em all away—and I'd go too if I could!"

"Why don't you?"

"Charlie! Gee!"

"I get fed up with your talk, talk, talk. Shut up, damn it! Leave me to my thoughts."

"They such pleasant company?"

"*What do you mean by that?*"

"Gee, you—you—you don't have to scare me. You don't have to yell! Whad'd I say, anyway? Gee!"

"Skip it. Shut up. Leave me alone."

"Leave you alone—hal! Times you been glad of me—when I waited on you hand and foot—no matter if I was sick myself! Washing out your stinking old coveralls when I felt—"

"Oh, for Christ's sake—"

"All you married me for was to get a servant girl—"

"Maybe I did!"

"Aw, gee, Charlie! I—I'm sorry. Just be decent with me. Be human. 'Cause I don't get it. Something's wrong, but—you never tell me what. We never share anything any more—"

"Why should we?"

"Well, we're married! . . . I mean, you used to tell me all your plans—how you'd be a big businessman some day and make a lot of money, and get to be manager of—"

"Why, you bitch! You blasted, damned slut! Throw that in my face again, damn you, and I'll—"

"B-but—"

"Shut up!"

"Honest, I don't know you any more, Charlie! You changed."

"What about you? You've turned into a nagging, spiteful bitch of a woman—"

"Aw, Charlie!"

"O.K. Only leave me alone, damn it. I'm tired. I—my nerves are shot. Just leave me alone. Jesus—if there was only some apple!"

"Charlie, what are we going to do all our lives? Just sit here by our-

selves while you drink? You got it bad. You do it all the time now. Look, why not ask Mickey over again, huh? He useta come."

"That lying sonofabitch! I did ask him—and he ain't coming. Not any more—ever. He said so. Why? Ha! Because I 'cried on his shoulder every time and growled all the while.' Yeah—I guess so! The hell with it! That's only an excuse."

"Excuse? For what? . . . Y' know, Charlie, he ain't been over since before that Flemhos boy was killed. You'd think—"

"*So what?* . . . What's the connection? . . . *What did you mean?*"

"Gee—nothing. I don't know if there is any connection."

"You goddam right there ain't! You better remember that."

Mickey Pratt tossed the package of filter discs on the seat of the pick-up and climbed behind the wheel. At the same instant an almost irresistible impulse seized him to cut and run, to abandon the car where it stood, leave town, get away from the farm, his job, all of it; to find work somewhere else—a long way off!

It was the first time in more than a fortnight that he had been off the place, and it seemed to him, irrationally, that it was a chance to escape. This was silly. If he chose, he could see Ed Thomas tomorrow and give notice: "escape" was hardly necessary.

Still he had a feeling that if he were going, it must be this way. If he returned to the farm, packed, asked for his time, he would lose his nerve; he would start asking himself why. And there was no reason. No real reason.

Sitting there at the curb, his eyes staring sightlessly down the empty Sunday streets ahead, Mickey sweated with the urgency of the impulse, and the moisture turned cold on his body in the chill bright air. Once he put a hand on the door handle; but common sense stopped him, and gradually the compulsion of the moment subsided. Presently he turned the ignition, stepped on the starter, pulled away with a whirl of chains on packed ice.

Moses, he was low! It was a depression that had sneaked up on him, and one without specific cause. He was fed up with the farm, he supposed; with the futile life he led, with not getting anywhere.

Only such things had never bothered him before. His wants were few: food, bed, a little fun. And he had all that.

What the hell was wrong, he wondered, and glanced down at the package of filter discs beside him. That, for one thing.

For the filter discs made no sense. Charlie Dann did not need them.

There were two boxes in the storeroom at the creamery that he must know about. Yet he had routed out a clerk from the supply house on a Sunday afternoon and had sent Mickey to town to meet him and get them.

It had spoiled plans Mick had had. Nothing important. Still it was annoying. And, perhaps, deliberate.

Taken with other things, little things—extra jobs, last-minute assignments, inconveniences, insinuating cracks that begged for a warm retort—it looked as though Charlie were after him as he had been after Dick for so long. The pattern was the same.

Why?

Not simply because Mick had refused to come to his house, surely. Dann was queer but not that queer.

Then why?

Mickey dodged answering, knowing he could not be honest. The thought-feeling hanging in his mind since Dick's death had never gained the form of words; the vague suspicions had never been thought through. And they must not be now.

When he turned into the County Road he saw Mary Heim walking ahead of him, and realized with distaste that he must offer her a ride. It made a lousy ending for a lousy day.

## VI

HOLIDAYS were rarely celebrated at the dairy, but Sonia Goetz had used Washington's Birthday to invite Ed Thomas and Clint Matlock to supper. She knew neither man had much social life, and had hoped to give both a good time; but the party limped. There seemed to be a surprising reserve between her guests.

Trying to enliven things while Ben carved the roast, she descended to shop talk. "How's the dealer business, Ed? How many have we now? There used to be—what?—nineteen, twenty?"

Clint said, "There are now twenty-two. Ask the man who figures the bills."

Ed nodded: "Yes, we've put on two since summer. One's very good—a two-route dealer. The other—"

"Not so hot," Clint finished. "Which reminds me: another of his checks bounced yesterday. Whart got in touch with Quinlan."

The manager made a face. "Nevertheless! The dealer business is all right. Actually we couldn't handle any more. Our plant's too near capacity."

"When do we move to the new one?" Ben asked.

"We hoped April 1st, but it'll be nearer the 15th. But when we do, you'll see this place mushroom. There are at least two dealers waiting—one over in Moulton. Thought of going in there retail; but it's a long way, and, besides, the more I see of dealer business, the better I like it. Retail has too many headaches." Ed paused, leaning across the table. "On the other hand we may very well be doubling our retail routes before long."

"Doubling them!" Clint exclaimed, and Ben's eyes lifted from the plate he was filling, to stare with curiosity and interest.

Ed was pleased. "This Eastern Dairies affair may be a break for us. Some of the small locals have been hurt badly, and I've an idea that at the right moment I can pick up what's left of 'em. Then there's Keystone. They've long been heading for bankruptcy, and this competition may finish them. If we could take them over— Of course it'd be cut-throat, with Eastern trying to beat us out, but if it worked we'd have this town sewed up. That's what I meant by doubling the business. . . . There are *if's*, of course. If the break should come before the new plant's ready we couldn't handle it—"

Clint said, "And if Eastern should prove stiffer competition than—"

"Oh, they won't! The worst is over there, and we have more customers than when we started. Ben's worse off, but—"

Ben said, "I lost two more—that's twenty-five off my route."

"Barchi has done what the rest of you should have: capitalized on the unsettled market. You know, you can try for years to sell a customer, and get nowhere till some neighbor changes; then suddenly, for no reason, your customer makes up her mind. Well, Eastern has started people changing, and Barchi is making hay out of it. No matter what Whart says, that boy's a salesman. The rest of you—particularly the last couple of weeks—have dogged it!"

Ben looked miserable.

Clint said, "You've yourself to thank for that, Ed."

The manager's lips thinned, and Sonia thought, So there's the rub!

Clint added, "If you'd put on a salesman, those drivers would 've stepped into Eastern and tied a can to them. How about it, Ben?"

Ben gaped helplessly. "Well—" He made vague, distressed gestures. "We quit trying, all right. Guess we were pretty disappointed."

"You could hear the thud of falling spirits all over the place," Clint said flatly. "This farm needed moral support, and you failed them. I think you know it now."

Ed Thomas had flushed angrily, and both Ben and Sonia held their breaths. In the end, however, he said merely, "I can't turn around and give them their salesman now."

Clint shrugged. "No. The damage is done; but it's not the only mistake you've made recently."

Sonia thrust in, "At least, Ed, your refusal broke up Lew's organization—or so Ben told me."

But Clint was on the warpath. "I heard otherwise. Ask Ben now."

They waited expectantly while Ben writhed. "They were—pretty discouraged for a while. They—went all to pieces at first. You see, I—I'd backed out earlier and—"

Sonia smiled proudly. "They tried to force him in, but Ben stood up to them. He doesn't believe as they do. He's not on their side."

Ben kept the record straight: "Well, on some things, I am. It's just—I don't like trouble. I hate to—"

Ed said: "I know how you stand, Ben. Anyway, you backed out?"

Ben was slow to continue because Sonia's eyes were on him. She was proud of him, he thought, and why? Because he had done something she had made him do! He was ashamed, the more so because it was clear by now that Barchi's threats had been bluff.

He sighed. "Yes, I—I'd backed out. Dunty was never in, and after Tom came back from talking to you he was all washed up. He wouldn't bother with a meeting Lew wanted or anything. Neither would Jake. Even Hal was lukewarm. Only the Chief and Barchi were more sore than discouraged. So I thought things had fallen through. But—well, Tom bounced back in the first couple of days, madder than he'd been before, and he, Bevis, Barchi, and the Chief had a meeting at Hal's. That was the end of last week."

"Bill Bevis, uh? Still with them."

"Bill's like me. He agrees with the boys a lot of the time. Only he's got the guts to help 'em. Yeah, and the guts to refuse to when he doesn't want to." Ben sounded gloomy.

"I give him credit for sincerity. Just as I do you."

"We'd be less brave if we weren't convinced of your tolerance," Clint put in.

Ed's "Thanks!" was wry, but the atmosphere improved perceptibly.

Ben said: "And Jake's joined up again. He was—he was pretty sore when you gave that new truck to me this week."

"One of the mistakes I mentioned," Clint said.

"Mistakes? Good Lord, Jake's already cost me twelve-hundred-odd. What could I do but give Ben the new truck, and Jake Ben's old one? I knew he'd be angry—and I didn't want to force him into Barchi's arms—but I can't pony up a brand-new truck every second week just to keep him out!"

"No, but remember it was the first bad accident Jake ever had; it may have been a lesson. Besides, this budding organization may prove dangerous, a lot more than twelve-hundred-dollars dangerous."

"I can't take it that seriously."

"All right, but you can now count Jake with Lew, Hal, and the rest. Because, from now on, all Barchi has to do when he weakens is point to Ben's truck."

Ben said: "And they're working on Dunty. They've got a scheme—You see, one day Lew made a crack about Dunty's trying to borrow money from him, and it turned out he's tried to borrow from almost all of us—"

Clint nodded. "I lent him something a month ago, and last week he was back for more. I wouldn't give it to him."

"Don't!" Ed frowned. "The man's a poor risk. He gets advances as fast as What'll let him, and if he's borrowing too— Uh-uh! I don't like the sound of it."

Ben said, "Well, what can you do when he tells you there's no coal, his kids are freezing, his landlord's going to put them out if—"

Sonia cried: "Ben, you haven't been giving him anything! Oh, Ben, when we've bills of our own and money's so tight!"

"Well—he sounded worse off than we were, even." He went on hurriedly: "Anyway, this scheme— When they found out he was borrowing, someone said, How about making a pool, letting him do it from the group, putting him under obligation—see?—sort of buying him in—"

Ed snorted. "How beautifully expensive! I wish they'd try it."

"Dunty's not the kind to feel obligations," Clint said soberly.

"There were objections like that," Ben agreed, "but they may try it. If it worked, they'd be stronger than ever."

Ed smirked. "I don't think we'll worry for a while."

Ben looked doubtful. "There was a meeting yesterday, Ed. I don't



know if Dunty went, but—they may be sending you another committee soon."

This time Ed looked badgered.

Clint said presently: "I was afraid they'd come back stronger than ever. What's it this time?"

"Wages. They figure, if they can't have a salesman, they ought at least to get a raise, especially when the rest of the farm did."

"It wouldn't occur to them," Ed growled, "that they missed one because of the trouble they made last summer?"

"Another mistake, punishing them for that."

Ed muttered, "They're getting their raise in June—"

"Then tell them about it."

Sonia cried abruptly: "Why not? And when you intend to give them something anyway—like this salesman—why quibble over *when*? It's face-saving, and it's—it's petty. I'm on your side, Ed, but—"

"I can't yield to force. Every instinct I have rebels when—"

Clint said, "You admitted yourself the drivers were decent."

"But they're trying to run my business for me."

"What's the difference, provided it runs? Good management means using a suggestion without worrying about where it comes from—"

"Meaning my management isn't good?" Ed turned to Clint sharply.

Sonia thought there might be an explosion right there at the table. Clint was far more deeply opposed to office policy than she had guessed, and the manager seemed almost guiltily self-conscious.

But Clint said pacifically: "The past is beyond criticism. Necessity guided it, and very successfully. But necessity no longer rules, and new policies should be formed. Well, I'm contributing my not-too-humble two cents' worth toward forming them."

Ed said: "Actually, I do welcome suggestions. Only I don't like to be pushed around, and it seems to me I always have been—by Whart or the drivers or somebody. My worst decisions have been made under pressure. No doubt I'll think better of this salesman business soon—"

"Don't! Wasted effort. Let it wait till fall as you planned. But—if you heard what Ben said a minute ago, you'll take the wind out of somebody's sails by announcing those June raises for the 1st of April."

"Now don't *you* start pushing me around!"

Sonia rose to clear the plates, but the discussion went on.

Ed added, "At least, you'll be glad to hear that during April or early May I'm turning Adrian and Red loose on these farm houses—"

"Glory be!" Sonia said from the kitchen.

"Hey, swell!"—from Ben. "Boy, how we've waited for this!"

He meant no criticism, but the manager stiffened. "It represents considerable sacrifice," he said. "We ought to be painting the garage and the lower barn; but, since the barn's burned, I'm letting the garage wait while your pesky places are fixed. But no one 'll appreciate it!"

Clint smiled involuntarily. Sonia, putting a plate of dessert before Ed, asked if this meant new furnaces as well.

"Oh, now look here!" He sounded huffy, but smiled at himself an instant later. "I can do so much, and a month's work—which is all we can spare—won't accomplish everything people want as it is!"

"I'm sorry! Half-jobs are—exasperating. . . . Let us be thankful for small favors, however!"

They settled to their desserts in virtual silence.

When the strain became evident she apologized. "I'm sorry, Ed! We've harped on touchy subjects tonight. The farm, like politics—"

"My fault," the manager grumbled. "Shouldn't have let you bother me. The drivers have kept me awake nights, and I suppose it's hard for me to discuss them, or tangent problems, impersonally."

"Then you take them more seriously than I thought," Clint said.

"Enough to know I have to smash their organizing."

"Would you"—wryly—"in this year of our Lord, deny Labor its right to organize? It's been well established."

"They don't have to do it here!"

"Anyway, I wonder if they can be stopped, Ed, things having gone this far? Delayed, yes: by yielding on judiciously chosen points; by neither knuckling under nor making them knuckle under to you, but cooperating on a basis of reason. I hate to see them organizing as much as you do, but what choice have they had? Their individual complaints have been ignored. It's the only way they could give their protests punch. With the example before them of what organization has done for others elsewhere—"

Sonia cried: "Clint, how can you say that, knowing how the big unions are dominated by Communists and racketeers exploiting labor? Oh, I only know what I read in the paper. But see how men have had to join against their wills—been denied the right to work if they didn't. Look at the exorbitant initiation fees you hear about—and dues—and the ridiculous jurisdictional complications—"

"Wait a minute! It's easy to talk in generalities, but you can discuss Labor with a capital L and never get to the heart of it because you've left People out. People make up the Labor Problem. I know no more

about big-time Labor than you do. What do ninety-nine out of a hundred that talk about it? But I know what's happened here at Weyland Meadows Dairy. This wasn't started by Communists or racketeers. Barchi—"

"We agreed he wasn't either, but he's abnormal."

Ed said, "Would I get in a fight if I said all leaders are abnormal in the sense that they're compensating for something or other?"

Clint grinned. "What makes leaders leaders isn't the question, because a leader alone isn't enough. Barchi made no headway with the drivers for a long time. Why? They had their gripes—the same ones they have now. Last summer's strike proved that, but it also proved they weren't dissatisfied enough to risk anything."

"They hoped to get something for nothing. I agree."

"They were our best-paid department," Clint said, "and their wages stacked up with local, if not metropolitan, ones; and though they did have kicks—long hours, route cutting, this-and-that—it was the best job most of them ever had. In short, they weren't really dissatisfied. You'll be surprised, but I think most felt as you and Sonia do, Ed: that, given time, such troubles as they had would iron themselves out."

Ben said, "And then, too, jobs used to be harder to find."

"Sure. Better times generally mean labor unrest."

Ed said: "And farm finances have been a factor. When a business is in the red, the boys feel lucky to be working at all. But now we're into the black—"

"True, too," Clint said. "But last summer times were already better, and the farm had been in the black for a year and a half. And anyway, would such factors account for the violent change of the last six months? Did the drivers suddenly discover that times-were-good, times-were-wonderful? that the farm was piling up a surplus?"

Ed said: "I'll admit a few mistakes—Tom's furnace for one; but except for the accident of Nancy's getting sick—"

"Accident!" Sonia cut in.

"—with luck we'd have got through the winter. Then, this spring, the houses would have been fixed up—"

"With furnaces?"

"Oh, all right! It was a mistake. . . . But I won't be blamed for Jake. In spite of all you say, I couldn't have done anything but what I did."

"Jake's psychology is infantile, yes; but it's a fact, and you have to handle it with understanding. Many a man's become angry with his boss over less. And many a boss has dealt with him as casually. I also

blame you for Myhychyk. All along you've admitted our route cutting is a rotten system; yet you won't sit down with the drivers to try to evolve one any better. Frankly, Ed, I believe that bad decisions have put those three—Tom, Jake, and the Chief—in active opposition. Not because Barchi said we were treating them unfairly, but because they'd felt the weight of injustice. Oh, if times had been bad or the farm losing money, it might not have been enough—who knows? That's where such factors come in. But it was a necessary part." Clint paused for breath.

"Grant—for argument—that I antagonized them," the manager challenged. "So what? Three out of eight!"

"More than that. There's Ben here, who admittedly agrees with his associates on a good many points. He was predisposed in your favor, so he's a good gauge of how far feeling has shifted. . . . And Bevis. His stand is without personal interest—so what has persuaded him to side with the men?"

"And Dunty? Roane?" Ed asked with heavy sarcasm.

Clint smiled quickly. "God knows why Hal joined up. And of course Dunty will be maverick until he's been bought or is sure of his winner. In any group, you can expect people whose motives are obscure and opportunists who are out coldly for themselves; but it's the North-Bevis-Larsen-Myhychyk combination that's the core of the organization—I *don't* include Barchi—and it's a combination that should never have been allowed to develop!"

Sonia said, "You make it sound as if it were all Ed's fault—"

"I didn't mean to. It isn't. If the drivers hadn't made a mistake last summer, Ed might be much more understanding of them now. Still, at present, I feel they're being the more reasonable.

"But notice, Sonia: there are no racketeers among them, no Communists. Simply people, sore over what they consider injustice, getting together to protect themselves, to win for themselves the necessities and comforts they believe they have a right to. The question isn't Labor as you read about it in the paper; we don't have to worry about jurisdictional angles, political angles, international angles; they don't exist. What's starting here contains the genes of good and evil, of course, as any embryo does; as it grows, it'll develop many allied problems. But here and now it's stripped of trimmings; the right or the wrong of it is as clear as it ever will be. . . . And I say, for God's sake stop talking as though this were a bloodless, enemy organization; stop talking about smashing it—which is treating symptom and not cause anyway—and

remember you're dealing with people: people who are as fallible and emotional as yourself—and as open to reason and justice. Merely because they're Labor—and very nearly Organized Labor—makes them neither more nor less than that. Perhaps Management and Labor can't get together—I wouldn't know! But I'm sure that People and People can—if they try."

## VII

HAL ROANE shut the door, removed his mittens, and tossed them on a chair. Bet, sitting on the couch, looked flushed; and Vic Stewart, half the room away in the straight chair by the radio, seemed unnaturally stiff and uncomfortable. A pulse began beating in Hal's jaw.

Shrugging out of his coat, he said: "You were here last Sunday, Stewart—and how often besides? When I been working?"

Vic answered resentfully. "Often enough! What of it?"

"You usually been careful to scram before I got back."

"The hell I have! I'm here now, ain't I?"

Hal went to the radio and tuned it down. "I'm home early."

Stewart kept his temper. "Use your head, Hal. I work all day every day. Except Sundays—and Sunday's a short day for you. Bet and I wouldn't have much time together, if that's what you're afraid of. I've come over because I know she leads a hell of a lonely life—"

"She complaining?"

Bet said, "Aw, Hal—please!"

"Never. But she's a long way from her friends, you're gone all day—and even when you're here, you're not such damned good company!"

"I'll do! If it's company she wants, she can stick to girl friends. If it's anything else, I'll take care of it. Quit hanging around."

Vic got to his feet. "I suppose you've stuck to men friends—"

"That's right." The interruption was flat, level, dangerous. "And have ever since our marriage. Our real marriage." As Hal's eyes met Bet's, an odd smile quirked between them.

Vic, sensing for perhaps the first time the secret ties that bind people, became suddenly, inexplicably angry. "You expect me to believe that? You've played around in your time, you—"

Hal said coldly: "That's no secret. So has Bet—"

"Now look here!"

"—and neither of us are kicking. But since that marriage, and as long

as it continues—she knows what that means—I'll be faithful to her. . . . And she'd damn well better be to me! You want to scram now, Stewart?"

Vic glanced at Bet, who said, "Please!"

From the window, Hal watched him down the drive; when he turned back to the room he said only, "When do we eat?"

"Right away, Hal. It's all started. I'll—put on the meat."

She moved heavily toward the kitchen, but lingered in the doorway watching as he crossed to the sofa and flopped on it full-length. "Hal, you don't have to be—jealous of Vic and me. Honest, there's nothing—"

He grunted. "If I'd 've thought there was, he wouldn't have walked out of here." His eyes on hers were cold fire. "If I ever do, the two of you better watch out."

She returned to him quickly. "Aw, don't be jealous, Hal! Honest—I'm in love with you. I have been ever since I first saw you; otherwise I wouldn't ever have let you get away with all you did."

"Uh. Well, don't kid yourself; I'm not jealous. I don't like people messing around with my things, that's all. And, for God's sake, get that soulful look off your face! I feel that way about my truck or my wallet or my watch. You don't need to get starry-eyed! Godfrey!"

"Anyway, I'm glad you said that about—being faithful, Hal—"

"Oh, for Christ's sake! You know I never double-timed any woman."

She shook her head. "You're *funny*!"

He muttered in disgust, but there was no other sign that she was unwelcome, so she stayed beside him. There was a long gap before he growled uncomfortably, "How you feeling now?"

Her look lightened at once. "Oh, I'm—I'm all right. And he—he's fine too. Husky—from the feel of him."

He grunted. "How long you got left?"

"Little over a month, maybe."

A muscle flickered in his cheek. "I feel like a louse!—letting you in for this."

Her eyes widened, for it was the first time he had even hinted as much. "Aw, Hal—forget it."

"I didn't intend to, goddam it. How'd I know it'd happen? I didn't think it could! We were always careful."

She said slowly: "I'm sorry it happened too, but only because it—it meant marrying me when you didn't want to. I wish I hadn't told Uncle Swan; but I was scared. And of course he—he—"

"Yeah. Forget it!"

"If it wasn't for that, everything 'd be fine. I don't mind the baby. I think that's swell. I always wanted one. You'll want him too—"

"Me? Hell, no! And—" He tried to stop, but the pent-up emotion exploded. "And I'm damned if I know how you can be so blasted *calm*—with—with—*that*—only a month away! Maybe you don't know what you're up against. It's nothing to kid about. I know, because my mother died having me!"

Silence. Bet said weakly, "Oh—I—I'm sorry, Hal," because there was nothing else to say. Then her mind shot off at a tangent. "Hal, you know that's—that's the first time you've told me anything about—what happened before we met?"

"Yeah? Well, I don't think much about the past."

"That's funny. I always do. I mean, things that happen to you aren't fun till you can look back—and laugh at them."

"Some things you don't laugh at, ever. Like being unwanted—or hated. My old man didn't want a baby any more than I do. Yeah, I know. He'd 've got used to me and all that—except when I arrived I destroyed something he did want—and bad! Killed my mother—that's what he always said—and he hated me for it."

"But that's not reasonable!"

"It's how he felt. Me—I say *he* was to blame, same as I'd be if anything happens to you. But he blamed it on me and never let me forget it all the while he was drinking himself to death. Well, skip it. It's nothing to laugh at, even looking back."

"No. Gee, Hal, I—"

"Don't get sloppy!" He pulled his hand from her groping fingers. "You damned women! Hell, no wonder I don't talk about myself. Go on, get dinner! Leave me alone."

She obeyed, but it was the first confidence he had ever given her, and she could not pass it by. She thought: You may have been unwanted, Hal, but you're not any more. There's me! Yes, and before long, there'll be someone else! We'll make up to you, Hal, for a lot.

A battered Ford truck, its fragile-looking rear assembly, wooden-spoked wheels, and high-pressure tires nakedly exposed by a lack of fenders, was backed up to the barn, its cleated tailgate making a runway to the ground. On its high-sided, open-topped body, a smeared and dusty gray, were printed the words: "Nick Ivano—Butcher."

Nick himself, the little greaseball to whom the farm had for years sold its aged animals, was inside the barn where it was warm, telling

Charlie Dann stories in English unintelligible except for the dirty words, while Charlie, listening with half his mind, checked the animals being shipped. One cow was already in the truck, being held by Joe Denny, Flemhos's successor; Donny Ochs and Pop Haas were wrestling another up the runway, and Mickey Pratt was coming slowly down the barn aisle with a third.

When the balky beast was finally boosted aboard, Charlie waved Mick ahead. "All right. Trot her in." But then, as the third cow started placidly up the cleats: "Hey, wait a minute! What—" The cow ambled on, but Mickey paused. "I told you to get 382."

"I got her." Mick glanced at the cow, then back down the aisle at the empty stanchion.

But Charlie said: "The hell you did! That's not Carnation Esther."

"What do you mean? Sure it is. I got her from the right—"

"But *look* at her!" This was one of Charlie's swift, petulant angers. "Good God, a glance'd tell you! Look at her markings!"

Mick looked, but the markings meant nothing to him. He suspected Charlie was riding him.

"What's the ear tag say? D'you look at it? . . . Well, do, then!"

The ear-tag number was not 382, and Mickey crawled. It was unusual, particularly in winter, for cows to get switched in their places, so he had assumed that Carnation Esther was in Carnation Esther's stanchion. But he had no excuse for not checking her ear tag: that was elementary.

Charlie said: "Of all the goddam dumb— O.K., get her out of there! Take her back! Find the right one!"

But as the boys led the rescued animal back up the aisle, his pointed fox face was less angry than thoughtful, and his narrowed eyes, following Pratt's retreating back, were coolly calculating.

"Nick—" He gave the word unconscious weight.

"Uh?"

"Sell you three more of these in about—two weeks?"

"Sha-uh!"

"This is what?—the 24th? Make it"—he counted on his fingers—"March 8th. Be a Saturday. O.K.?"

"Yi-a."

He could be counted on. Nick got figures—dates and prices—very accurately, in spite of his cryptic English.

The search for Carnation Esther was on. Charlie, watching it, let a little cat-smile flicker briefly across his lips.



Freda's feet on the stairs were quick and light, and Ed Thomas, looking up from his paper as she appeared in the living-room doorway, said "Well!" in involuntary approval. "All dressed up! And scrumptious too. Date?"

"Yes! Like the new hat?"

Her father said, "No. The veil makes you look twenty-five."

"Swell!" Freda said. "I think it's cute." She was radiant and excited. She might look twenty-five to Swan, but she was a long way from it.

The manager asked, "Who's the lucky guy?"

Freda pouted mysteriously, but Swan said, "Amos Vliet."

"Oh, fine! A coming youngster, even if he is a hunyock."

"There's hunyock blood in our family already," Swan said, his tone even. "We're proud of it. Could even stand some more—eh, Freda?"

She colored beautifully. "Don't joke, daddy! I barely know him."

"All right. But I think his asking you out is fine. Hope you have a grand time. Where you going?"

"Movie, I guess. Maybe dancing afterwards."

"Enjoy yourself. And lock up when you come in."

The bell rang, making her jump. "Oh, dear! So soon—and I'm *right on top of the door*. What'll he think?"

Her father grinned. "He'll see you through the side lights if you—"

"But I'm all *ready*. He'll think I've been *waiting* for him!"

"He'll appreciate it. Go on, open it."

When the two had gone, Thomas sighed. "Saturday—and pay day too! There'll be big doings tonight—for everyone but us."

Mischief lit Swan's eyes. "I know a couple of babes."

But Ed Thomas snorted. Then: "Sorry I said that about Vliet. Slip of the tongue. I like him a lot as a plant man."

"But you wouldn't want your daughter going out with him?"

"Well, Freda and he seem a queer pair. Amos is—tough. Decent, I'm sure, but tough. And Freda, in spite of her hat, is still fairly naïve." He shook his head. "It's *his* interest I don't understand. I'd have expected him to like—cheap, sophisticated girls."

"You're a snob, Ed. You can't help it."

Thomas's lips made a wry grimace. "I suppose I am. And I've got a cynical, suspicious nature, too. But, if Freda were my daughter, damned if I wouldn't suspect he was taking her out to curry favor with the old man. Of course—"

The shadow of a frown traced lines above Swan's high nose. "There's no reason for him to curry favor with me."

Ed shook his head. "No. But that's how the combination strikes me."

Swan shook his head. "Even if there were reason, I wouldn't believe it of him. Vliet's a good boy, a straight one."

His hesitation had been almost imperceptible.

## VIII

EUNICE HEIM was having a birthday in mid-March. Two years before, at seventeen, her sister Mary had had the present of a shopping trip to New York; and it was a long-standing promise that Eunice should celebrate her seventeenth with a similar trip.

For the last month there had been no other topic at the Heim home. Eunice could not wait, and was insistent that a date be set and plans made. Adrian thought the shopping could be done locally, and Mary, with sisterly malice, agreed; Ida, however, was determined Eunice should have her spree—"It's little enough the farm's permitted us to give our daughters." Still the magnitude of the occasion daunted her, and plans hung fire, waiting ostensibly on a means of transportation; for the Heims had no car, train schedules were inconvenient, and Ida did not like busses. She kept putting things off from day to day in the vague hope that someone from the farm would be driving in, while quarrels frayed family tempers and Clint Matlock's as well. Clint had got on surprisingly well with the Heims simply by keeping his mouth shut and staying out from underfoot; but he began to feel that, if this particular argument were not settled soon, he might explode.

Such was the situation during the first week in March when he heard Charlie Dann asking Thomas for Saturday off to go to town; and it never occurred to him not to stop the man and explain about the Heims.

"They want to share expenses, of course," he said. The other's face clouded, and he added hastily: "But, if I'm off base, skip it. They don't know I've asked you—suggested it on my own—so we can both forget it if—"

Charlie waved a hand. "Ida don't get on with Roxy much; but, if they're so hard put they're willing to go with us, I guess we can stand them and their money."

Clint had forgotten how hostile the two families were. Now he said: "Forget it, Charlie. I didn't mean to—"

"No, no. Ask 'em. If they want to come, have Adrian speak to me."

Saturday the 8th. I'm leaving early and comin' back early, not staying overnight. If that suits 'em—"

Ida was not enthusiastic, and implied that Clint's interference was unwarranted; nevertheless, it was clear she would make the best of a bad situation if pressure were applied and Eunice promptly applied it.

On Friday, after the midnight milking, Charlie drew Mickey Pratt aside and broke the news: "I'm leaving you in charge tomorrow, Mick."

"Me!"

"Who else? Not Donny Ochs, you can bet your life!"

That made Mickey grin. "I s'pose not. Well, O.K. I'll—I'll try. I was surprised, that's all. I thought you were off me."

"Yeah? Thought it was you who were off me. But I figured, what of it? You were the only one I could trust anyway."

"Aw, hell! Sure, I'll help out. Not much to watch out for. Routine, mostly."

"One thing," Charlie said. "I made a date with the butcher before I knew I was going away. You'll have to see he gets his cows."

"O.K. What do I charge him?"

"Never mind the price. I'll stop and see him tomorrow on the way home, haggle with him myself, and get his check. All you gotta do is see he gets the animals. Come to the office, and I'll give you a list."

The milk room of the upper barn had been converted into a temporary office since the fire. There he found a piece of paper, and scribbled three lines on it.

"Can you read that?"

Mickey read aloud: "'Weyland Cornucopia Ruth, number 14—'"

"Hate to see her go," Charlie mumbled. "About the last of our original herd, and a hell of a good milker in her time."

"'Weyland Pride Mary Esther, number 165. Jewel Cornucopia Ann, number 204.' Yeah, I can read 'em."

"Then come on, and I'll show you which they are. Don't want another mistake like you almost made a few days ago!"

Yeah, Mickey thought, that was something to remember and be careful about, all right. He took a good look at the cows Charlie pointed out, checking the names and numbers with his list while trying to fix them in his mind. No, sir. There'd be no slip-up this time; he'd make sure of that.

March had come in like a lamb with a succession of bright, beautiful days, broken by one of gentle rain which had taken most of January's

and February's snow; people were beginning to say that it had been a mild winter. And the weather held. Only a faint haze blurred the rising sun on Saturday morning, and it was clear overhead. The Danns' car left early at Charlie's methodical pace, with Adrian, Ida, and Eunice sitting stiffly in the back seat. Ida had gone to the manager personally to get Adrian the day off, perhaps because she was diffident about going to the city alone, perhaps because she wanted to fill the car so that Mary could be left behind without hard feelings; it was no secret that Eunice wanted her trip to be hers and hers alone.

The barn boys that morning were in one of those moods. They thought Mickey's being in charge of them was a great joke, and made the most of it. They played dumb. Something was wrong with a milking machine, a cooler, a steam hose: what should they do? They pretended to have fed the whole morning's ration to only half the cows, and someone whispered that a can of disinfectant had been spilled into the milk. They had Mickey crazy, but underneath the high spirits and crude humor they knew their business and did it efficiently enough.

Before they were through, and considerably before Mickey expected him, Nick Ivano backed the ancient Ford with its naked underpinnings to the main door and started yelling for "Cha'lie!" When Mickey explained about the trip to New York, the butcher squirted talk like a fountain. It took the boy awhile to get it, but it seemed Nick wanted his beef; he couldn't wait, he was in a hurry; Charlie had made a date with him, and he wanted his cows.

"Well, I'll give 'em to you," Mickey said, the strain of his recent kidding showing up in his tone. "But you don't have to yell at me. What the hell's the rush, anyhow?"

The other was off again. He seemed to be saying it was going to snow. Pratt stared at him, then at the sky. The sun was still shining; but the morning's haze had thickened heavily at the horizon, and long, streaky lines of light cloud were whipped in mare's-tails across the zenith.

"Storun," Nick said positively. He had to get home ahead of it. The truck was no good in snow: it got stuck. The cows would freeze.

Shrugging, Mickey called to Pop Haas and Joe Denny and showed them Charlie's list. "You guys gotta check these cows with me. You too, Nick. We don't want no mistakes." When the cows were loaded, he was sure there had been none. They had been checked by four men, and Nick and the two boys had signed their names to the list.

By then the gang had gone, and Pop and Joe did not linger. Mickey

did. He stayed at the barn all morning, held by an odd uneasiness which was not entirely dispelled when he finally went to lunch.

In spite of Nick, he was surprised to find that the haze had developed into a dull grayness that hid the sky and exuded big wet flakes. They fell lazily, beautifully, twisting in spirals as the occasional gust of wind disturbed them, thickening rapidly on the ground. Before he had finished eating, the air had turned chill and raw; the flakes had become pellets, firm and hard; the gusty wind had steadied and increased. Drifts were beginning to scrawl short curves and long slanting lines away from every obstruction.

From a boarding-house window, Mickey watched the routes come in, most of them a bit early, even for a Saturday, as though the same urgency had touched all the drivers and made them anxious to get unloaded. Later he watched Swan Ellis get out the old hard-tired Brockway, bolt the snow plow to it, and load it down with brick and tile for better traction: it was Swan's job to keep a lane cleared to the State Road. He wondered briefly if the snow would delay Charlie's getting home. He hoped not.

The storm and the usual Saturday haste-to-be-through made for less horseplay at the afternoon milking, and Mickey breathed a sigh of relief when it was safely over. That was that, he told himself; Charlie would be home before the next one, and nothing serious had marred the day.

But then he found Donny Ochs lingering in the milk room studying a chart. Donny took considerable interest in the technical and statistical side of dairying.

"Say," he said, "what's happened to old Lucy Pride?"

"I do' know. What?"

"Look at her chart. She's been giving forty, forty-five pounds right along. Today, all of a sudden, she gives fifteen for two milkings. She must have the pip."

An odd sensation pricked behind Mickey's ears, and his voice sounded funny when he said, "Let's see that chart."

The dairy kept production and butterfat records for selected thoroughbreds, and of course Weyland Ormsby Lucy Pride, its record-holder, was among these. He stared at the figures without seeing them.

"Joe Denny didn't say anything—" She was in Joe's string.

"He's new. He mightn't notice. Maybe we oughta look at her, huh?"

Mick said: "I got something to do right now. I'll look at her later and tell Charlie as soon as he comes in." He prayed Donny would not decide

to look for himself; he wanted no one looking at Lucy before he himself had a chance to.

Donny hung up the chart. "I got to beat it myself."

Mickey sprinted in his haste, but when he got to Lucy Pride's stall there was not much to see. The cow that stood there looked like Lucy, and there was no indication that she was sick. He pulled her head around till he could see the number on her ear tag, 185, and glanced up at the stenciled name plate and number over her stanchion. It read, "Weyland Ormsby Pride, 185," and slowly the nasty suspicion that had been in his mind began to fade. Everything looked all right. She looked like Lucy. She had Lucy's number. If only she had milked like Lucy—

There was a way of making sure: the markings. The registration papers of every animal in the herd were in the office in a metal file which had brought them through the fire smoke-stained and scorched, but safe. And Mickey had to be sure.

He had a struggle with Charlie's filing system, but eventually returned to the barn floor with Lucy Pride's papers, on the back of which, in the cross-hatched diagram, Charlie had long ago drawn in ink the equivalent of Lucy Pride's fingerprints.

After that, it took Mickey about thirty seconds to come to the ugly conclusion that the cow before him was not Lucy, even if she wore Lucy's tag.

Which animal was she, then?

He raced back to the files, made one shrewd guess, returned to the floor with another registration, and the matter was settled: the cow was Weyland Pride Mary Esther, number 165, who was supposed to have gone to the butcher.

Returning the papers to the office, Pratt glanced at the alarm clock on the desk. It was almost five, which was awfully late.

The operator said, "New York is calling a Mr. Clinton Matlock—"

"Speaking," Clint said.

"Here's your party. Go ahead, please."

"Mr. Matlock? . . . This is Ida Heim. It's ridiculous, of course, but Charlie says the storm's so bad we can't get back tonight—"

Clint said, "It's *quite* bad down here. I think you're wise—"

"Oh, you do! Well, if the man wasn't a rabbit, we'd be back. He went off somewhere and saw an accident this afternoon and got scared. I knew we shouldn't have trusted him."

"There's always the train—"

"Who'd meet us? Besides, Adrian and Eunice seem to think it's a lark being without a piece of luggage or a stitch of clothing—"

"I see." Clint kept the grin from his voice. "I'll tell Ed—"

Mrs. Heim was not interested in that. "Mr. Matlock, you understand I can't have you staying with Mary in that house tonight? You'll have to tell her to go to the Goetzes' or the Norths'. Both have extra beds. And see that she does. You understand? You two are not to spend the night together there under any circumstances!"

"We won't," Clint said, with perhaps undue emphasis.

Just then Mickey Pratt came in. The boy stood brushing the snow off his shoulders with slow, vaguely rhythmical strokes, and his face was pale and twisted. When Clint looked a question he mouthed: "I want to use the phone."

Clint had to keep him waiting while Ida wore herself out. When he finally hung up he grinned. "Phew! Ida Heim. They can't get back tonight—any of 'em."

Mickey had been using a telephone book and now without answering he picked up the instrument, asked for the toll line, and gave a Jersey City number when the operator answered.

"Is this Nick Ivano's?" Clint looked up curiously, knowing who Nick was. "Well, this is Weyland Meadows Dairy. This is Mickey Pratt, from the barns. Look, this morning I sold Nick some cows. . . . Three cows, yeah. . . . Well, look, are they—dead yet?" He hung on the answer, and the eagerness died in his face. "Oh, they are, huh?"

Silence. The telephone squawked. Mickey said: "No, no. Nothing's wrong. Look. Want to do something for me? Get the ear tags off the carcasses and mail 'em back to me. . . . What? . . . Who? . . . Oh!" A long gap. "Yeah, he said he'd drop by and get Nick's check. So he got the tags too, uh?" Mickey sighed heavily. "O.K., fella. Thanks a lot."

He set the phone down, and for a minute just stood there.

Leaving the building a short time later, Matlock was surprised at how much colder it had become and how thickly the snow drove through the premature twilight. The wind had molded a low curve of drift across the steps; Clint, hating to go in over his rubbers, vaulted this and promptly sat down hard on the ridges of frozen slush in the drive. It was futile trying to keep his feet dry anyway, for half a dozen knee-deep drifts spanned the road between creamery and sheds. Each wore a trailing plume of snow that made it hard to tell where the crest was.

There was nothing for it but to plunge straight across and stamp his feet vigorously when he reached the clearer ground beyond the corncrib.

He had got that far when the street lights came on, accenting the unnatural twilight murk. The distant ones were only blurred, dim halos of brightness through the storm. Pushing him on, its sweep unbroken here, the wind urged him at an awkward, tiring half-run while headlights moved parallel on the County Road. That would be Swan and the snow-plow, he supposed. At least that road was still open, though the houses across there were almost indistinguishable.

He reached the Heims' back porch after a bit more wading, and dutifully removed his rubbers and brushed his trousers, coat, and hat before going in. With the wind forcing chill drafts through every crack, the house seemed cold; so he went down and stoked the furnace. He noticed one spot where snow seemed actually to be sifting in, but the living room was in the lee and not uncomfortable.

Mary was lounging there, her skirts above her knees, a forbidden confession magazine in her lap.

He broke the news promptly. "Your folks can't get back, Mary. The storm. They phoned. . . . You're to move to the Goetzes' or the Norths' for tonight. If you'll get packed, I'll take you over before I change my clothes."

"Who says I am?"

"Your mother. She didn't want us to be alone here overnight."

"Yeah. I can imagine. Only we'll have to wait. I'm getting dinner."

"I'll get my own. The storm's getting worse."

She pouted. "You wouldn't like spending a storm-locked night—"

"That's neither here nor there. Your mother said—"

"I think it'd be romantic and exciting, keeping ourselves warm while the wind howled outside. I think it sounds cozy. Don't you?"

"Attractive as it may be, your mother wouldn't like it."

He was beginning to be nervous. That she would obey eventually, he did not doubt. She was teasing him, trying to scare him, but when it came down to it, she would surely go.

"I think I'll stay. Mother needs to be taken down. Let her yell. I'm not scared of her."

"Well, I am!"

"All right, throw me out." Her eyes sparkled. "I dare you!"

"Let's cut the kidding. You can stay till after supper—"

"I can stay all night. It's my house! You've told me to move out. Can you help it if I don't?"



He stammered: "But glory, woman! Do you want to get me fired? If I let you stay, your mother 'd have me bounced so fast—"

"You're not complimentary. Men have died for less."

He began to get angry. "Have it your own way, then! Stay; get your mother mad at you. But not me. If you won't get out, I will!"

If she had been joking, it was a joke that held subconscious intention, for he might as well have slapped her. Anger and contempt blazed suddenly on her rapid, pretty face, and she had to fight to keep her bantering tone. "Scaredy cat!" she said, in a voice that did not ring true. "So you'd run off, leave me all by myself in the midst of a wild storm!"

"I'll have Sonia come and stay with you."

"You will *not*! Go on, if you want—I don't want you here! But this is my house, and I won't have anyone in it I didn't invite. She can't force herself on me. I won't have her!"

Clint thought, This is what I get for meddling in the Heims' affairs!

He tossed pajamas and toothbrush into an overnight bag and fought his way to the Goetzes'. They were glad to see him. Sonia, of course, would not hear of their leaving Mary alone and waded back through the storm to talk to the girl.

"Mary wasn't rude—not exactly," she reported afterward. She added acridly: "I hope the wind gives her the willies tonight. It wouldn't hurt that child to be thoroughly scared for once!"

Mickey Pratt, with two hours to go till the midnight milking, found the boarding house intolerable. Ordinarily on a Saturday, he would have had the place to himself; but the storm had kept the boys in, and they sat around griping about it. Having stood it as long as he could, he got into windbreaker and boots and went out. On the porch with the hard snow stinging his face, he let the clean wind clear his lungs of dead air and his head of thoughts. It was a wild black night; lights came through the thickness softly, fuzzily, but sounds were lost in the wind, deadened in the snow. Moses, a real storm! And in March, too, when winter ought to be over.

He wandered across to the creamery. The big drift at the end of the plant was more than waist-deep now and had a crust on it. Amos Vliet's car was parked on the near side, but no other creamery cars were visible; and he found Larry Ochs working alone in the bottling room.

Asked where the boys were, Larry squirted tobacco juice. "Amos and Manny Zapeto are down the road helpin' Max Mann in. He's stuck in a drift. Do' know where the rest are."

"Let's go help 'em."

"Can't. Gotta start things here."

Mickey wallowed back to the County Road. Far down it a vague halo of brightness shone through the driving snow, and he started toward the light, turning his side and sometimes his back to the bitter, knifelike wind.

Well below the Roanes' drive, where the road passed through a shallow cut, traffic had stalled. The cut, blown almost full, had been too much for the plow, and Swan Ellis, Marc Vaccarelli, Amos, and several others were shoveling down it toward the refulgence of other headlights beyond.

Mickey shouted, "Got another shovel?" and they were glad of his help.

In spite of the snow that eddied in, sifting down their necks, forming new soft layers where their shovels had just been, the drift slowly yielded; and finally there was a track down which they could snake the stalled cars. Swan turned his plow and ran back to the farm ahead of them, reaching the big drift in the drive without serious trouble.

The creamery gang, already late, deserted; but Mickey stuck: it seemed good to work. He and the farm men shoveled and sweated till they could get the cars up to the garage; then they went into the creamery to warm up, and the boy was surprised that it was only eleven o'clock. When they went out again he was with them.

Time passed in a blur of white snow and yellow headlights. The Brockway was a poor plow—in spite of chains and the load piled on its rear, it had little traction—so that there were intervals of hard shoveling alternated with stretches of idle riding in which the wind bit through sweaters and windbreakers to chill their sweating bodies. When he quit at the end of another hour, he was ashamed. He told Swan wryly: "Hell, I wouldn't bother with the milking, only I'm supposed to be in charge while Charlie's away."

He walked back toward the farm, wondering why he bothered. "Supposed to be in charge"—what a laugh! Another twenty-four hours and he would be out of here, for good. What was the use?

Trudging up the snowy road, leaning back against the gale, he felt cold now that he had quit working. The problem he had driven out of his thoughts in the last two hours came racing back, more stark than ever now that his mind had had its rest.

For there was a way out if he wanted to take it.

He had known from the time of his telephone call that although Weyland Ormsby Lucy Pride was dead, although Charlie had the ear tags in

his possession, he himself still held aces: because, before Charlie could convince anyone that there had been a "mistake," he must return and exchange the 165 ear tag from the dead Lucy for the 185 on her living substitute. Of course he had not expected to be delayed by a storm nor to have Mickey spot the exchange of animals; and now, if Mickey showed Donny Ochs (for instance) that 185 tag before Dann got back, Charlie would have something to explain.

And there was the list Nick, Pop, and Joe had all signed.

Oh, he had the man trapped! The hell of it was: he couldn't see himself springing it.

The Charlie who had been his friend had been a good guy.

Mickey was a boy without violent passions or desires or the ability to think things through. His reaction to Charlie Dann's treachery was not anger nor fear for the future but the acute, deep ache of disillusionment; it did not kill the friendship he had once felt for the man—rather it turned to a poignant but terribly alive emotion which made excuses for him. Charlie had not been right for months, he thought; had not been himself. A devil had been riding him, and he was not responsible for the horrible things he had done. Mickey's mind refused to admit that Charlie was a dangerous man or one who must be stopped. Instead he thought continuously of the man he had once known and admired; and this man he could not act against.

That being so, he wondered why he did not get out now, leave the farm tonight, tomorrow—of his own accord, without waiting to be thrown out. Wouldn't it be easier all around? Why did he hesitate?

Now, plodding back home with the wind numbing his ears, he knew why and saw the true depths of his dilemma.

It was because he hated to leave Weyland Meadows.

He found this hard to understand, having always assumed he would drift along eventually as he always had. Why not? The pay was poor, the hours were bad, the work was dirty. There was every reason why he should be glad, thankful, to get out. Yet he wasn't. Oddly, the place had become home to him, all the home he had. The guys weren't much, but they were the only friends he had. The job was putrid, but it was all he knew.

Stumbling through the blizzard, Mickey knew he had grown up. Drifting no longer looked good, the "next" place no longer loomed excitingly as a new adventure where things would be better. He wanted to settle down here in the job that was his. His! He, who had wanted so little, was thinking in terms of what was his!

In a way he was grateful to Charlie for prying him out of his rut, forcing him to identify his own feelings. Who knew if he would ever have known about them otherwise? Now all was clear. He knew what he wanted—and couldn't have because Charlie stood in the way.

To save himself, he must crush the man—and he couldn't.

A fool dilemma, perhaps, but for Mick there was no answer.

If only there were someone to talk it out with!

Through the blizzard, he saw the lights of the creamery, beyond them the long rows of barn windows like a ship at night.

The barn. The milking he had walked back to help with . . .

To hell with it! He did not feel like milking now.

What, then? He stood uncertainly under the street light, knowing he ought to go inside. His feet were without sensation except for prickles in them when he stamped; his hands were half frozen, and his ears so numb they were probably nipped. He had been chilled through by the wind. A good case of frostbite would top everything nicely.

But the light at Larry's corner beckoned, and he walked on.

God, if there were just someone to talk to!

His feeling this way was a sign of how deeply he was hurt, for he had been one to keep his troubles, such as they were, to himself. Tonight something howled for release.

But who, on the whole farm, could he trust?

He checked the men off, one by one, as he passed the farm buildings.

Charlie's house, dark and empty. Charlie—the first to go to, perhaps, if he had been there. Or the last!

Walsh's, dark too. God knew Red and Luella were the last to inspire confidence. What they knew, the farm knew.

The Ochses'. But did you confide in the ineffective?

He turned up the road between the houses and the pines at the edge of the orchard, and found it waist-deep with long, heavy drifts. Floundering through them, he felt tired and licked, and wondered how it would be to burrow into the softness of one and sleep. The thought frightened him. He was in a hell of a hole, but not ready for suicide yet! He began to circle the block toward the boarding house.

The North place. Tom seemed decent, but Mickey barely knew him.

The Ihloffs'. A light there—but he was not tempted to stop.

The Heims'. Ha! . . . Or Clint Matlock.

Mickey paused, partly because he was winded, partly because of this last thought. Crazy even to dream of talking to anyone from the office. Besides, he knew Clint as little as he knew Tom North.

But Clint was a good guy. People said he could keep his mouth shut. And he already knew something was wrong, from this afternoon.

This reminded Mick that the Heims were away, all but Mary, and she was to spend the night somewhere else. Tonight—one night in all the year—Clint would be alone in there, and they could have the house to themselves for a talk. Mickey thought he knew Fate when he saw it.

The hint of help made the temptation and the need for it suddenly stronger than they had been before. Still—what was the use?

Abruptly he found himself wallowing in the snow; a stronger gust of wind had actually put him down. This scared him. He felt done in, too exhausted to get back to the boarding house. He wanted to get inside quick—somewhere, anywhere—before he froze.

He staggered toward the Heim porch. This was excuse enough to get Clint up. If he decided later not to talk, he wouldn't have to!

The front door was sheltered, for which he was thankful. If he had had to stand in the wind the long while before the lights came on and the door opened, he would have frozen sure. . . .

## IX

IN the East, storms rarely last overnight; but Clint Matlock awoke to find the Goetzes' house still trembling with the force of this one. Beyond the window was an opaque gray through which the electric light pole, thirty feet outside, was barely distinguishable. The temperature, on his way to the office later, was around twenty; the wind, strong and gusty, driving the snow horizontally before it.

The routes had not yet gone out. Indeed, the only drivers around were Ben Goetz, Hal Roane, and Tom North, who stood in the main office with Ed Thomas staring out at figures, dim as shadows, down on the County Road.

"The Brockway's stuck again," the manager said. "Been stuck in different places all night. Damn thing hasn't any traction. Agh! I spend money for a plow, and, the first real storm we have, look at it!"

He did not know if the State Road were open. No one had come through from outside since the creamery gang the night before, and Quinlan's truck with the dealers' returns, needed before the bottling could be completed, was unreported for hours. "Quinlan's driver," Ed growled, "phones Route Seven is blocked—tree down—so that idiot

Quinlan sends him by Tylersville! He says, the last he heard, the man was near Roxbury following a snowplow. That was around six o'clock. God knows where he is now!"

There was nothing to do at the office, and Clint, deciding he might be more useful out in the snow, plowed back home to change to suitable clothes. The Heim house was cold, so he stoked the furnace. Afterward, going to his room to change, he noticed the door to Mary's room was closed. There was no sound from behind it. Indeed, the house was so quiet he wondered if she were there at all, and remembered barely discernible footprints between the back porch and the road which he had taken, half incredulously, to be his own of the evening before.

He was too late to help with the Brockway, but found the creamery boys, who had dug it out, standing in the churned snow while it rolled off. Swan Ellis, shivering astride the heavy tractor, spotted him and asked, "More bad news from the office?"

Clint shook his head. "No—unless it's the dealers' truck. It's lost somewhere beyond Roxbury, and the creamery needs its bottles."

"I'll go look for it."

"Maybe you should ask Ed first. Stop at the office and warm up, anyway. You look half frozen."

"I'll be all right. If Vliet gets stuck with that Brock again, get Marc Vaccarelli up. He's been off the plow since four o'clock and should be slept out. Let him use the light tractor; it should work as well as this."

With misgivings, Clint saw Swan disappear, then piled into the pickup with the other men and followed in the wake of the plow. Excepting the farm drive, which was blocked by a giant drift between the creamery and the garage, the road as far as Roane's was fairly well cleared; but beyond this several shallow cuts extending to the State Road were filled shoulder-deep, and the Brockway lacked the weight to punch through them. Its hard-tired wheels jumped and slipped in their chains, tossing loose snow futilely behind it; and, even when men with shovels worked up ahead, progress was painfully slow. Clint soon began to wonder if they could get the routes out at all, and that doubt persisted even when Bevis and Larsen loomed up through the storm and reported the State Road was open after a fashion.

It was grueling work. The wind snatched the breath from their lungs, left collars and mufflers frosted, filled the cuts again almost as fast as they were dug clear, and lashed mercilessly at their faces. The long expanse of white road ahead made their efforts seem pygmy and endless. Sometime after nine Mickey Pratt and his barn boys, through with the

morning milking, came down to help; the men who had been working, ready to be spelled, headed thankfully for the office to thaw out, Clint among them.

He found Carly Groce deluged with telephone calls, and Ed Thomas restless over the delay.

"Good Lord," he said, "how can people expect delivery as usual on a day like this! It's not reasonable."

"Mothers with babies to feed aren't reasonable," Ed said simply.

Clint thought wearily that there were too many men around doing nothing—Larry Ochs was in the office, and so were the five drivers and Red Walsh, telling stories; but he said nothing, and indeed, when the creamery gang went out into the storm again, he himself was not with them. The work had taken more out of him than he had thought.

Later Barchi and Myhychyk arrived in the pick-up. They had waded from the State Road to the spot where the men were working and had driven from there, bringing serious news: the Brockway had backed off the edge of a culvert and was half turned over in the ditch. Ed Thomas groaned and threw up his hands, but Clint climbed stiffly into his wet clothes and went to wake Marc Vaccarelli.

Down the road, work was at a standstill. The men had dug the plow free; but it was down on its axle with one rear wheel hanging in space, so that it could not help itself. Marc hitched on; but the tractor was too light, and its wheels merely spun in the snow. There was a further delay while jacks were sent for. With these the farm men succeeded in jerking the truck onto the road's edge, only to have the dead weight of it slide down the crown into the ditch again. Next the rope broke, and Vaccarelli was thrown, hurting his head so that he had to be sent back to the farm. A council of war was then held. Clearly the big tractor was needed in order to finish the job—Clint kicked himself for ever letting Swan go off with it—and it fell to Mickey Pratt, one of the few present who could run a tractor, to go look for it.

By now the snow had thinned so that distant woodland was visible across the fields; but the gray overcast was unbroken, the wind still strong, and it was colder—a lot colder, Mickey decided after he had ridden a few minutes in the wind. Following Swan's almost obliterated tracks away from the farm was not too hard, and the tractor moved nicely through the snow. Its small front wheels wobbled and staggered, but the big rear ones turned steadily. Moreover, the country was wooded in this direction, and the snow, though deep, was neither drifted nor packed. Which made the going easier.

At the fork beyond the railroad, Swan had turned right. Either way led to Roxbury; and Mickey, gambling that Swan was swinging the circle, chose left. Around the first corner and not a hundred yards down, he found Quinlan's truck in the middle of the road. The driver was out in front of it shoveling with the slow, dogged movements of one who has been at it for hours.

"The trail's broken as far as Roxbury," Mickey told the manager as they watched the men clear the drive for the trailer-truck; "and they say the state roads to Tylersville and beyond are O.K. How about sending the milk trucks out that way? I mean there's only one bad spot between here and the village—that cut by the railroad—and I got the big feller through that all right. I could tow the stand-drives through, easy."

"That's sending the boys the long way into town, and God knows what they may run into between here and there; but, if they're going to deliver at all today, I guess you've got the answer. See they get as far as Roxbury, will you?"

Mickey felt pepped up when the boss took his suggestion. He felt still better once he had herded all seven stand-drives to the village and turned them loose there.

Swan Ellis returned about eleven o'clock, very tired. Telephone lines had been down so that he could not call in, and he had stayed out looking for Quinlan's driver too long. He was shivering uncontrollably, and there were white spots on his cheeks and the tip of his nose. Ed sent him home to bed, and he went meekly, evidence enough of how he was feeling.

Clint, Mickey, Amos Vliet, Vic Stewart, and Oz Tatum returned to the stalled Brockway, taking both tractors and a piece of chain. This time there were no hitches; but when the plow was back on the road Amos, instead of continuing with the work, headed it for home.

"We're getting nowhere," he said, "and won't till we get more weight. Well, I got an idea—sort of a desperate one, but I'm trying it."

With the help of the hydraulic jack in the garage, he hoisted the stand-drive which was used as relief truck onto the broad, flat floor of the Brockway and chocked it there securely with blocks and ropes.

Red Walsh shook his head. "Even if it don't fall off, the old Brock can't carry all that and plow too," he kept saying. "They'll yank the guts outa her."



But when Amos tried it in the half-cleared drive, it looked to Clint as though he had the answer; at least the wheels no longer slipped and bounced.

At the office Thomas asked, "Whose idea is that?" and nodded when Clint told him.

An hour later Amos reported back, with tired satisfaction in his face. "We got a lane punched through to the State Road. Vic Stewart's on the plow now, and he's going to widen the County Road first—shove the stuff back so there's room for two cars—then clean out the farm roads. I don't think there'll be any more trouble."

The manager snorted. "There is. The drivers reached town all right, but they're getting stuck in the back streets there, right and left. Carly's just sent Ben to a garage for help, and he's the third."

"Third, huh? Might be worth keeping a guy in town with a tractor to pull 'em loose. Save towing charges. I'll do it myself, soon's the milk's bottled."

But Mickey Pratt said: "You been working all night. Why not me?"

Ten minutes later he was on the light tractor again, headed out.

The day had darkened; more snow was sifting down.

Before the bottling was done, the first powdering had become a soft white blanket. It might have been a clearing-up flurry—the wind was less, the temperature up a bit—but Ed Thomas, taking no chances, arranged for the creamery gang to sleep at the farm.

Night was black beyond the windows when Amos Vliet awoke, but it was barely six o'clock. Outside, headed for the office, he found it still snowing hard, but was glad to see that the farm roads were all plowed; this meant surely that the County Road was open too. The wind was almost dead, the snow not drifting, just settling softly, thickly, silently through the night.

There was a single light in the creamery, where Clint Matlock sat at his desk.

"How are things?" Amos asked.

Clint shrugged. "We've been keeping Mick on the move. One stuck truck after another." He bobbled the tongue twister. "And not a route in yet—or started in! The boys had a helluva day in town."

"Mick must be out on his feet. He should 'a' been spelled. I'll go in now, send him home."

"You may have another job. There's no word from the producers' truck. I tried to trace it by phone, but the lines are down."

Amos scowled. The creamery was hushed and oddly silent. Without that milk, it would be like this all night. He muttered:

"I was a dope letting him go off by himself. You're right: it's my job to find him. How about a couple guys to go with me?"

"Take Larry Ochs. He hasn't done anything all day."

"He's kept the plant running. I'll ask him, though. Maybe we can use his car. Who else is there? Stewart? Gotta stop for something to eat at the boarding house; maybe someone there'll be willing to come. Be back 'fore I start, case you get any word."

Vic Stewart proved willing, and so did Joe Denny from the barn. Larry did not, but changed his mind when he found they proposed to use his car anyway. The four of them left the farm about seven, Stewart driving.

After the snow and cold, the stuffy heat of the drugstore struck Mickey Pratt like a physical blow, and he put a hand on the counter to steady himself. Then he stamped his feet, brushed off his shoulders, and went across to the fountain.

"Wish you didn't keep it so hot," he said to the clerk. "Any more calls?"

"Naw. Not yet. Still snowin', huh?"

"Yeah. Gimme some coffee."

"An' something else? You had nothin' but coffee since I come on."

"Can't. That lantern I bought took most of what I got—an' maybe I'll have to buy somepin more before I get home. I'm saving up." Hoarding the quarter he had left. "They wouldn't let me eat nothing anyway."

"Ha! They been keepin' you jumpin'. You get your guy?"

"Yeh. Damn fool tried to get through an alley."

"'S he crazy? What's a matter with your drivers anyway?"

Mickey shrugged. "You can't blame 'em: they got started five-six hours late this morning and been getting later ever since; they got to town before your lousy plows had found out it was snowing, so they hadda walk lotsa places they usually drive. Hell, they walked miles, I guess—through drifts—trying to hurry all the time 'cause they were late. Finally they started taking chances, driving where they wouldn't 've earlier, to save a few steps. You can't blame 'em."

"How long you been on? You was here when I came."

"Got in town about noon." It was after ten o'clock now.

"Jeez, you don't work no union hours, do ya?"

"The drivers been out in it longer'n that, mister."

"Plenty of time-and-a-half, anyway."

"Oh, yeah?"

"What ya mean? No time-and-a-half? Then why kill yourselves?"

Mickey shrugged vaguely. "Milk has to be delivered."

The telephone in the pay booth rang, and he muttered bitter things. It was Clint: "You can come home now. All is forgiven."

"Jesus God! Y' don't mean it. Everybody in?"

"All but one have phoned in from Dan's Diner on Route Seven. The other fellow's through delivering; just got stuck leaving town. Once you pull him loose you can follow him in."

"Knew there was a catch. Who's it this time? And where?"

Clint told him where and added, "It's Jake Larsen again."

"Kee-ris!" Mickey came out of the booth.

The clerk said: "What's the matter with that guy? Every other time you gone out, it's to get him."

"He keeps taking his stand-drive where only a five-ton truck could go! . . . Where's my damn lantern, now?" He found it, and went out.

The cold seared his lungs, and he felt hollow. The sidewalk was ice under a coating of snow, and he shuffled gingerly to the tractor, parked against the piled-up snow in the gutter. He swung it in a U-turn and set off up the street, the electric hand lantern he had bought serving as a headlight.

Jake was waiting on a corner and led him to the stalled truck. "It's a short cut, see? I was in a hurry to get home."

Mickey had perfected a system for dragging the trucks loose, and it took two minutes now to get the stand-drive to the street.

"Thanks, guy. I won't get stuck again," Jake promised.

He drove off, his chains spraying ice, and skidded around a distant corner. Mick shook his head: the guy never learned.

Wearily, he climbed on his tractor and set out in pursuit. Now if the cops didn't pick him up for driving with just a hand lantern—

He progressed at a rapid crawl while the chill rawness of the night crept into his blood. He began to be afraid of falling asleep and smashing into something, or tumbling off in the snow and freezing. What a hell of a day he had put in! *And why?*

"All is forgiven," Clint had said. But Mickey knew he was going home to be fired, not forgiven. He had stuck with the farm, worked a few extra hours, done things that weren't strictly his job. But was that enough to **make** Ed Thomas cancel out his sending several hundred dollars' worth of prize cow to the butcher? Hell, no!

He had known this all day, yet had plugged on. He did not know why. It had simply seemed natural to help.

He made steady, if pedestrian, progress, waving his lantern at approaching cars. Halfway out, he found Bevis's stand-drive in the ditch; but pulling it out was only another routine chore.

Once he had garaged the tractor, he stood in the snow looking dully at the lighted, noisy creamery. They needed help there, unloading. He tried to goad himself to lend a hand, but couldn't. He looked at the darkened barns and knew that in another hour the boys there would be struggling, shorthanded, with the milking. To hell with that, too! He had done enough.

After a moment he turned his back on both. He was ready to sleep.

But it was not toward his room at the boarding house that his weary footsteps took him.

The four who had gone for the producers' truck brought it in about midnight after five hours' struggle with unbroken back roads. They had all the milk the creamery needed for the night's bottling; but Joe Denny and Vic Stewart had to be helped from Larry's car to the boarding house, and Larry, after taking the car home, neglected to return to the plant. Amos Vliet and the truck's driver pitched in at the creamery.

By two o'clock the barn boys, having finished their milking, had plodded home to bed. The drivers, all spending the night on the farm, were asleep. So was Clint. So was Ed Thomas, though he had stood at the window until he had counted every last truck up the County Road. Swan Ellis was not, and neither was Freda; for Swan was feverish and ill. Neither was Oz Tatum, who had relieved Vaccarelli on the plow.

About three, the snow stopped, and Tatum went thankfully home. At four the dealers' truck came in on schedule with Quinlan himself driving, and at five-thirty the bottling was done and the gang sent home. Only Amos lingered. It was no part of his job to help Ihloff reload the dealers' truck or the routes, but he did so this morning; not until Quinlan had gone, not until the weary drivers had dragged themselves and their trucks to the dock and away again, did he admit his job was done, and quit.

## X

AWARENESS returned to Mick muffled in thick layers of exhaustion. Every cell in his body protested he had had too little sleep, begged to slip again into comforting oblivion; but he had to get up and get out of here. He knew he had to, though for the moment the reason escaped him. There was a dim grayness in the room, and the clock on the bureau said six-thirty. Something about Charlie Dann, he thought. No, that wasn't it. That was for later in the day, when the barn man returned. The thought of Charlie, the prospect of getting fired, no longer stirred the fierce emotion of the other night; such feelings could never be warmed over. He had achieved no solution, merely a fatalistic state of mind in which he could let events slide numbly to whatever conclusion was inevitable.

His eyes opened again. Where in hell was he, anyway? That bureau wasn't his! This wasn't the boarding house!

Oh, yeah . . .

That was why he was awake; so he could scam out of here before people were around to see him leaving. Really awake now, he saw that the sky beyond the window had blue in it, which meant the storm had quit. He ought to drag himself together and beat it.

Easing himself onto his back, he became aware of Mary. She was awake and watching him, and he had the uncomfortable feeling she had been awake all night, enjoying his helpless nearness. She must have helped him to bed, he thought uncomfortably; he could not remember getting there. Well, he had asked for it, coming back here after what had happened. His eyes traveled from her bare shoulders to her face and the yellow hair lying in a ruffled aura on the pillow. She was pretty, all right. Just the same, she was a slut.

She whispered, "Hello. Feeling better?"

"I feel all right."

"You were so terribly tired last night. And cold. You kept shivering in your sleep, and finally I curled all around you till you got warm. You were so tired you didn't even know it."

Mickey shrank from the picture she conjured up. He muttered, "I gotta beat it 'fore the whole farm wakes up."

"I know. You're late now. Only I couldn't wake you." She added, "The folks don't go away very often, Mickey, so I guess we won't be like this again in a long while. If ever."

He heard the final farewell rather than the wistful suggestion, and

relief flooded him. He had dreaded demands for other and more dangerous meetings.

He mumbled hypocritically: "Been swell, Mary. Maybe sometime—" She shook her head flatly. "No, Mickey."

He was annoyed now, feeling she might at least have said "perhaps."

"You make me feel like a—a heel, Mary—breaking in on you the other night—then coming back again—"

"Why should you feel like a heel?"

"Aw, I— Hell! You know. Sort of forced my way in—"

She laughed. "Why, you idiot! Forced yourself in! After you found Clint wasn't here and I was alone, I had to *drag* you in. What could I do? You were wet and cold. If I'd let you go back in the storm, you might have caught pneumonia! And as for the rest—that was only inevitable, wasn't it?"

"I do' know. I know I shouldn't have come in, that's all."

"Are you sorry—honestly? I'm not."

"Well— Gee, no! Only it—it worries me. What if— You know!"

"There's no need to worry."

"How ya know?"

"I suppose I don't, really. But I've a feeling—a hunch. Don't worry about me, Mickey. There won't be any trouble."

He was ashamed now of thinking her a slut. Perhaps she wasn't. He was pretty sure he was the first actually to possess her, and even decent girls got seduced sometimes, given circumstances like the storm and the mood he had been in. And she was being swell this morning.

It made him ashamed of himself. He growled, "Well, if there should be, I'll—well, I'll be around. You know what I mean."

"You're sweet, Mickey, but don't worry. Mother wouldn't let us marry even if I were in trouble—and even if I wanted to."

"Even if you wanted to?" He felt oddly taken aback.

"Um. I don't much. Do you mind?" She added, "You have to go now, but—"

Well, a guy had to say goodbye-forever right.

Their lips touched gently, and though she scarcely returned the kiss, the brief contact brought him a trembling, tingling excitement that held him there, looking down at her where she lay with closed eyes.

I gotta go, he thought; I'm late now. She expects me to.

But he said aloud, recklessly, "Oh, hell, let's make it a real kiss!" His voice was abrupt and unsteady.

So the sun was up, glaring blindly on the snowy earth when he finally left, and he only hoped he was not seen.

Reaction had him by then. He was thinking: The little bitch!

And he was disgusted with himself as well.

It was nearly noon before Charlie Dann returned. He took the Heims directly home, then garaged his car at the sheds; and he and Roxy walked, package-laden, down the drive, along the road, and up the path to their house. There he stopped to rebuild the furnace fire, which had gone out. As soon as it was going he changed to boots and barn clothes, and slogged through the snow to the office. It was a necessary move; before taking any rash action, he had to be sure that the "mistake" over Lucy Pride had not been discovered. But the manager's greeting was warm, and nothing was said except that things at the dairy seemed to have moved smoothly in his absence.

Relieved, Charlie went directly to the upper barn. There he fooled around, making quietly sure that he was alone. He feared a deliberate spy less than someone doing unscheduled work, so he merely called up into the loft to ask if anyone were there instead of going up.

Then, with the 165 ear tag back on Weyland Pride Mary Esther where it belonged and the telltale 185 tag in his pocket, he left the barns and went home to lunch, his heart swelling in his chest with the acuteness of his triumph.

After he had gone Mickey Pratt climbed slowly from the loft, his face bleak. Till now he had hoped against hope that he had been wrong.

Charlie was too cute to hurry straight to the office, but waited till early Tuesday morning. Mickey Pratt saw him go in, saw him reappear, and waited numbly to be sent for; but it was only when the milking was over and he was walking home down the drive that Ed Thomas opened an office window and called:

"Want to come up a minute, Mick?"

Clint Matlock and the bookkeeper looked at him oddly in the outer office.

"Close the door," Ed said, and then, "Sit down."

Mickey obeyed awkwardly, and waited.

"Charlie tells me a—a rather serious mistake was made while he was away. He seems to think you were responsible. Do you know what it was?"

"Yeah, I guess so." It sounded sullen to Pratt's own ears.

"You should have told me. When did you find out, and how?"

"Donny Ochs spotted the difference in production Saturday."

"Yes. That's what Charlie did. So you two checked up?"

"I did. Donny had to go. I guess he forgot about it later."

Ed nodded. "How would a mistake like that happen, Mickey? Didn't you look at the ear tags? That would seem an elementary precaution." When the boy was silent, he insisted: "Didn't you, Mickey?"

"Sure."

"What did you do? Confuse 165 with 185—at a hasty glance?"

"I guess so."

"Didn't you have anyone check them with you?"

Silence.

"So you admit it was due to your carelessness that a famous record-holding animal went to the butcher instead of one whose milking days were over?"

Mickey nodded curtly.

"I see. Well, Charlie wants you fired."

Pratt knew that the moment had come for him to talk if he were going to talk, and wondered dully if he would be believed. Inertia gripped him, and there was silence in the office.

The manager studied him, frowning. "You discovered your mistake Saturday afternoon, Mickey. What did you do about it?"

Pratt shrugged. "What could I do?"

"Clint says you called Ivano on the phone that afternoon."

Mickey gaped and hesitated. "Yeah, but the cows were dead. So what could I do?"

"At least you did that! But why ask about the ear tags?"

"Uh—what?"

"The ear tags. You asked Ivano to mail them back to you. Why?"

"I don't remember it," Pratt said. He had forgotten till then.

"We don't use the tags over, do we? Why ask to have them mailed back?"

"Maybe I asked to have 'em *read* back."

"And were they read back?"

"We-ell—no."

"Why not? Ivano wouldn't have removed them and thrown them away, and the carcasses couldn't have been disposed of so soon—"

"I don't think I asked about the tags at all," Mickey insisted desperately. "Why would I? What difference does it make anyway?"



The manager shook his head. "I don't know." And after a moment: "Weren't you and Charlie pretty good friends?"

"Yes," Mickey said. "We been damn good friends for a long while." Again there was silence. He fidgeted, said finally, "Well, I better be on my way, huh?"

Ed sighed. "Like it here?"

"Huh? Like it? Yeah, sure. It's all right here."

"Would you stay if you had the choice?"

Mickey blinked. "I—guess maybe. I mean, I was thinking of drifting on this spring anyhow, so getting fired ain't gonna break my heart."

Ed smiled. "You can stay if you want, Mickey."

"I can, huh?" It sounded funny and dull. "Yeah, but—but Charlie—He won't like it. He wants me fired, you said."

Ed was wry. "If he's your pal, he'll be glad to see you stay."

Oh, Christ! He wanted to stay, but, remembering what had happened to Flemhos after Charlie had failed to get him fired, he doubted if it was good sense. He found himself trembling.

The manager said: "Personally, I'd like to see you stay—very much. I'm sure Charlie will too. What do you say?"

There was no time to think it out, so Mickey did what he wanted to do.

## XI

BEN GOETZ said: "I can't, Hack. I haven't it!"

He tried to edge away, but Hack Dunty had him by the sleeve. "Aw, you make twice what I do, and pay half the rent. And you got no kids. Sure, you got it. Come on. You can spare me five till the 15th. Only three days. I'll pay you back then—the whole works—all you given me! Only I gotta have the cash. The wife and kids won't have no supper otherwise. That's an honest-to-God fact."

"But you've borrowed so much already, Hack."

"Kids eat," Hack said, "need clothes. And I had debts when I come here. You don't know what it's like, living with debt collectors on your tail—"

"Don't kid yourself! They left me nothing either. That's why—"

"What you got may seem like nothing," Hack insisted, "but to me

it'd be the difference between hearing the kids laugh and bawl. There ain't no one else I can turn to, Ben. The others ganged up on me—the drivers. They won't loan me more till I join their union. I don't believe in that stuff—I'd tell 'em just what they could do, if it weren't for the kids, but what's pride and self-respect against a hungry baby? If you can't gimme something, I gotta knuckle under."

Ben said, "I got just a dollar-twenty to last me to the 15th." He escaped the clutching fingers. "Sorry, Hack, but I gotta go."

Blood from a stone, Hack thought as the gangling driver moved off. Well, he had wangled twenty-five from him anyway. That was something.

The farm's lending limits, he guessed, were about reached. Ben and three or four other soft touches had contributed about a hundred dollars between them, and he had been able to hit up less sympathetic souls in smaller amounts for about fifty or sixty more. Now that racket was finished. He might try Max Mann again, Joe Denny; but the well was nearly dry.

The drivers' kitty remained. Fifteen bucks.

The lousy cheapskates—trying to buy him for that!

Hack Dunty chuckled. He had made more than that out of the kitty already: there were those on the farm who approved his reluctance to be bribed and had been susceptible to a slight touch to help strengthen his soul against dat ol' debbil union. Big shots you wouldn't ordinarily think of scrounging from.

Yeah, he'd go visit the barn and the creamery boys once more. Then, in a few days, he'd go see Barchi. No point letting even fifteen dollars lie around loose when he could have it merely by promising to be a union man. If they expected him to stay bought for that, they were pretty innocent.

And when that angle petered out what was to prevent his becoming unbought again? For a price. If he chose. If it seemed smart.

He nodded gently to himself.

The manager stopped his car beside Mickey Pratt and said, "I want to talk to you. Climb in."

Mickey hesitated, an odd premonition stirring within him. "I jest come from the barns. I prob'ly stink."

Ed Thomas waved that aside. "Climb in!" And when the car was in motion: "I had to go to New York today. I called on Nick Ivano."

Mickey's hand closed convulsively on the door handle.

Ed smiled faintly. "Naturally I asked about those cows. Odd! He says he checked them as they were loaded with a list Charlie had left with you and then signed the list before leaving."

Pratt opened his mouth, closed it, jittered unhappily in his seat. There was silence as they turned left at Goetz's corner down a muddy road between sagging piles of dirty snow.

"Any truth to it? Nick also remembers your call. You did ask to have those tags mailed back. He told you he couldn't because Charlie had already called and taken them. Does it bring the conversation back to you at all?"

No answer. Ed guided the car through the muddy ruts and waited. Then: "What's back of this, Mickey? I hope I'm no fool. Ever since Clint mentioned your phone call—and I'm only thankful he did—I've wondered. Now that I've talked to Nick, it seems perfectly clear that Charlie framed you. Why? And why try to take the blame for him? You made no defense at all, and I don't understand it. Why, Mickey?"

"Could you turn on a guy who was once a good friend?"

"I certainly could if he went after me like that!"

"That wasn't his fault. Hell! I can't say it, but a guy gets off on the wrong foot, makes a mistake—and then he can't stop. Things gang up on him. It ain't Charlie's fault, I tell you."

"What's he got against you?"

"That don't make no difference. It's between us."

"Maybe. But your private grudge has cost the farm a valuable cow. Moreover, I don't like this business of a department head persecuting his men. You're not the first, Mickey; there was Dick Flemhos—"

"He had damn good reasons for that."

Ed's face clouded. "Perhaps. But it's becoming a habit and has got to stop. I wonder if the time to dispense with Charlie hasn't come."

"Aw, hell, you can't do that! Not over some lousy old cow. Jeez, Ed, the poor guy's old and— How could he get another job, start over? He and Roxy ain't so well off, you know, and he loves this place. It'd kill him if he had to go—"

"I haven't made up my mind. Perhaps if you told me what was behind all this, it might make a difference—"

But the boy's lips tightened. "I can't. It ain't my business."

"All right. I'll think it over. In the meantime, let him stew. Let him wonder why you're still working. When he comes and asks, we'll see."

★ ★ ★

At first Ed thought the two boys wanted their mid-month advances. It was Saturday afternoon the 15th, and he was alone in the main office. "Carly has the checks," he said.

Tom North answered: "We'd like to see you, Ed. For a minute."

"Oh!" Tom's dark, somber face, Hal Roane's arrogant, aloof one, told him nothing. "Oh! Well, come in. Glad to talk to you any time."

"We're representing the boys," Tom said.

"Ha-ha! Another committee, eh?" It sounded unintentionally patronizing, and he tried to twist it into a joke. "With a substitution in the backfield." He was shaken as he always was by unexpected trouble.

Hal said in his cramped, rusty way, "Bill Bevis figured he couldn't talk for us about wages."

"He's with us a hundred per cent, though," Tom added. "It's just that he's paid on a different basis and didn't feel he could deal for us fairly. So Hal came."

"Wages?" Ed repeated inanely. "Wages?" He had no control of the situation. Wages were dynamite, and the boys might be less reasonable this time. He must pull himself together.

"We speak for Bill and six of the seven drivers. More than before, see? Ben's still shy of us, but Dunty's joined up."

"Uh—how much did you finally pay him?" This disconcerted Tom, and Ed added, feeling better, "Now that we know how we stand"—his smile implied doubt of the drivers' position—"what is it you want?"

"Wanta ask a question," Hal said.

But it was Tom who explained: "Last summer, Ed, you told some of us we could expect a raise. Well, the rest of the farm got theirs, but we didn't. We'd like to know what happened."

"You'll get yours in June."

There was a thoughtful pause. He had surprised them.

Tom said slowly, "What—exactly—will we get in June?"

"Depends. You understand, wages here will always depend on how well the dairy is doing. Our policy is to return to the boys as wages all profits over and above a margin of safety."

"And," Hal said, "what goes into new barns and creameries."

Ed jumped on that gratefully: "The barn cost you nothing; it came out of insurance. The creamery you should consider an investment. Instead of building it, we could have given everyone here a substantial immediate increase, yes. But no more. Ever! Because we're at capacity in the present plant now, and, if we stayed in it, could make little more

profit than we do today. You see what I mean? A choice of one raise now—or several later.”

“Unless we need another plant first.”

Tom put in: “So we’ll get our raises in June? O.K.! But why didn’t we get ’em with the rest in January?”

Ed looked surprised at his abruptness. “Because, with the cost of the creamery, we found we couldn’t raise everybody immediately and—”

“And we were the suckers?”

“You boys have been paid half to two-thirds as much again as some departments. I felt that the less blessed should get the first benefits. But Whart and I took the rap with you.”

Tom asked, “Then resentment against our threatened strike last summer had nothing to do with it?”

“Do you honestly think I’d stoop to reprisals? Perhaps that business didn’t endear you boys to me much, but—”

Tom and Hal watched in silence.

Ed said flatly, “Reprisals are cheap!”

“Suppose we caused trouble now. How about those June raises?”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a question.”

It was also a corner. He said, “I can’t answer that.”

And Hal said: “Skip it, Tom. What the hell? We’re not looking for trouble; all we got’s a proposition. So let’s get at it.”

“But I want to know. If we have to talk under threat of—”

“Skip it! Skip it! Sure, he was sore at us, but what the hell? He ain’t threatening as long as we ain’t. Ain’t that right, Ed?”

“It is.” But the world was topsy-turvy when it was Tom who was carrying the fight to the farm, and Hal who was restraining him. It worried Ed, for he knew the influence conservative, unimaginative Tom could have with the boys. He said, “Now, this proposition—”

Hal nodded. “We gave you a headache last summer. Well, O.K.! So you cost us about three months’ raise. We both had our innings. How about calling it quits and making some new arrangements starting in April?”

Tom urged, “It’s costing us more to live, Ed.”

So the arguments began. Prices were hiking; so were taxes. They were working long hours and would work longer when they went on night delivery. A salesman would have helped a lot, but Ed had not seen it that way, so—

“What’s the proposition?” Ed repeated impatiently.

Hal told him. "First the boys wanted a flat one per cent, but then we thought it'd be fairer to ask for a fixed bonus for overtime. That'd encourage us to put more time into selling—"

"Or into—" Ed stopped belatedly.

Hal's eyes were cold. "Loafing more around pool halls and diners?"

The manager shrugged.

Tom said, "We'd guarantee to claim only the time we worked, Ed."

"Maybe you wouldn't trust us, but you would Bill Bevis. We're willing to let him judge our work, if you are."

Ed squirmed. "How much you want for overtime?"

"A dollar an hour."

"What! Why, man alive, that's more than time-and-a-half!"

"For some. Say time-and-a-half *or* the dollar, whichever's lower."

Tom said, "That's a fair proposition, Ed. How's it sound?"

Ed thought fast. "Good enough to serve as basis for discussion when we talk terms about your June raise. I can't promise to accept it as is, but—it's a temperate, sound suggestion."

There was silence. Tom picked at a dirty patch on his coverall. "We figured the new arrangement should begin in April."

"That's hardly possible. We can't afford it now."

"You mean the money isn't in the bank? Actually?"

"No, I don't! Of course it is. We'd be in damn bad shape if it weren't. But will it still be in December—or next year—or two years from now—if we commit ourselves to paying you more than the farm's going to make? That's what I have to think of."

Hal growled, "The boys feel pretty strongly about this."

"Is that a threat?"

"Nah-h. Just hoping you'd meet us halfway—"

"But I have! I've virtually accepted your proposition for June. If you insist, I *will* accept it—and pray business holds up!"

A bleak pause. Hal tried again. "How about April on a—temporary basis. Subject to hashing over in June, if necessary—"

"I hardly think that's possible."

Hal got up slowly. "You hafta admit we tried to be decent, Ed."

## XII

March 17

DEAR ED:

Received your letter and accompanying statement. Congratulations on the best February on record! The profit figure is scarcely stupendous, but it's the first time, is it not, that the second month has shown any at all? A new high, and a genuine cause for celebration.

Regarding the wage boost for the drivers—by all means! In view of our promising condition, I see no reason to hesitate. In fact, if the May statement is as proportionately good as the present one, suppose we give the whole farm another raise—say half of what we contemplated for next January? My policy remains unchanged—I want the boys to have the profit as rapidly as is feasible—and I am not sure we need be as conservative as in the past, now that the new creamery is practically installed and business is flourishing. Personally, I would be willing to cut our margin of safety rather finer than before.

By the way, the architects assure me the new plant will be ready by the 15th of April. It was less than a year ago you were arguing so violently for it, and may I say I am wholeheartedly thankful you had the vision to foresee our needs and the courage to keep after me until I said Yes.

If you plan to make a little celebration of its opening, I for one will certainly be on hand. And what would you think of inviting public inspection for—say—a month\* after we begin using it? Put out throw-aways, advertise it in the papers, etc. There's a news story in it, and pictures, and even if not many actually came out to the farm, it would be excellent advertising. If this interests you, I'll be down the end of the month to talk it over.

Sincerely,

JERRY

## XIII

DRIVEN by his own weakness and his inability to abide uncertainty, Charlie Dann, at the end of a long week of studiously avoiding the office, went to see the manager to find out what was wrong.

Ed Thomas was working, and the glance he shot upward was brief

and frigid. "Be with you in a moment," he said. But he kept Charlie waiting, not offering him a seat, until the barn man knew it was intentional.

When Ed did raise his eyes again, it was to regard him with embarrassing interest, and Charlie became aware that he was unshaven and unkempt. He had cared little recently how he looked, but now Ed's critical look made him cringe.

He mumbled, "See Mickey's still working for me."

"Uh-huh."

The silence grew ominous, and Charlie, abruptly convinced of disaster, looked desperately at the door. Then words suddenly spouted unasked from his lips: "Yeah? Well, why? What lies did he tell you so's you let him stay? What did he say? Somepin about me? He tried to make out it was my fault, didn't he? He tried suckin' around?"

"No-o. He admitted making a mistake."

"Then why's he still here?"

"Because I'm afraid I haven't got to the bottom of it. Some points need explaining. A curious thing happened. According to Clint, Mick came up late Saturday to telephone Ivano. Asked if the cows were dead. Asked to have their ear tags mailed back to him."

Charlie's hands clenched convulsively.

"Naturally that interested me, and I called on Nick."

A long pause. Charlie realized that the manager was waiting for him to speak, and his crazed little mind raced like a cornered rabbit. He stammered, "I—suppose you found—" He wet his lips and forced the slow words out again: "I suppose you found—I'd been there and—got the tags? Well, I was! . . . I did. That's how I knew something was wrong—"

"Oh! Then not from the production records after all?"

"Well, yes, but—finding the wrong tag made me look at them."

"Why did you stop for the tags in the first place?"

"I—I always take 'em off and keep 'em. For—luck."

A grim smile touched Ed's lips. "Luck, eh? . . . And you knew a mistake had been made as soon as you saw the tags? Funny. Because Ivano checked those tags against the list you wrote out for Mickey. Unless the mistake was on that list—"

Charlie hesitated. "You got the list? . . . Was it?"

"I haven't got it. Mickey has. I know about it from Nick."

Wild hope squirmed in Charlie's breast. "I might 've made a mistake.



I was in a hurry. I prob'ly wrote wrong. Hell, if I did, I done Mickey a dirty trick, huh? You know, I think I remember now—"

"You're a goddam liar, Charlie!"

The barn man's mouth hung open at the brutal accusation. "Those cows were checked out of here like a shipment of gold. There were no 'mistakes'—on the list or in the shipping. That leaves your conduct open to strange interpretations. What have you against Mickey?"

"Me? Nothing! Not a goddam thing!"

"Then why try to have him fired for something he didn't do?"

"I didn't! It ain't so! If he says it is, he's a liar!"

"He didn't say so. I do. I found it out for myself."

In the flat statement, Charlie Dann heard judgment, but was suddenly too tired to care. His panic anxiety was gone, leaving only dull discouragement. He was licked and without the strength to deny it.

In the lengthening silence, the manager watched his disintegration with surprise and distaste; he had expected more fight, frantic lies, denials, pleas, but the sagging man opposite was already through.

"Suppose you want me to get out?"

Ed shrugged. "If you feel that's the answer. It's hard for me to say, not knowing the whole story. You seem to get the most unaccountable prejudices against your men. First Flemhos. Now Mickey. Granting you were right about Dick, what's behind this other? What is it you suspect Mickey of? Or is it vice versa?"

Charlie was suddenly on his feet, leaning over the desk, pounding on it. "What did he tell you? What did he say about me? What do you mean by that?" Then he must have seen Ed's bewilderment, for he sagged visibly, ghost-white, and swayed on his feet. "Naw—I just hated him—see? Never mind why. I tried to get him—and didn't. So I'll—I'll get out."

Ed nodded. "You'll want time to find a new job, so we'll waive notice on both sides; you can pack and leave as you choose; we'll pay you to the end of the month. That O.K.?"

Charlie agreed, but Ed was still puzzled and uneasy. He had hoped to find out what was behind this mess and had missed by a mile.

The kitchen was full of the odor of fresh doughnuts, and Roxy, standing at the stove, had just added a sizzling fresh one to the neat stack already in the pan. From the doorway, Charlie stared at her back, searching for words to break the news.

"You'll have to quit that," he said finally. "We got too much else to do. We gotta pack. We're leaving."

She turned, startled and uncertain. "Wha-what did you say?"

"We're getting out. Leaving." His voice was flat, dead.

"The f-farm?" Her incomprehension, the blankness of her vapid face, annoyed him. "Charlie! You—aren't quitting your job?"

"I got fired from it."

"F-fired! But, Charlie— Oh, gee! What happened? What—"

"Come on. We gotta pack. Forget the doughnuts."

"B-but—but when—?" Tears crept down her cheeks.

He shook her roughly. "Cut that! Start crying, and I'll smack you."

"I can't help it, Charlie. I— When do we have to—"

"Tomorrow. We're not staying here a second longer than—"

"*Tomorrow!* But we can't possibly! You can't pack a house overnight. Where'll we go? What'll we do with the furniture?"

Suddenly, without warning, she collapsed in a huddle on the kitchen floor, her hands wringing her apron, her tears no longer restrained. Charlie glowered at her wearily, making no move to comfort or stop her, and in due course the storm wore itself out. Then there was silence save for an occasional racking sob, the noise of water dripping from the eaves outside, the sizzling of fat in the frying pan.

He said at last: "Come on. There's work to do."

"I can't, Charlie."

"Can't what?"

"Leave it. It's home. You can't just walk out—leave—like this. We lived here twelve years. All our—our memories are here—"

"What's so good about them?"

"They're all we got." She shivered. "Charlie, I'm scared. What are we going to do? All we ever had is right here, and we're leaving it. There's nothing for us any other place. What'll we do? How much money we got?"

"Enough. We'll get along. Now look—"

"How much?" She struggled to her feet, holding to a table. "How much, Charlie? Please! I got a right to know."

"Plenty. Maybe five hundred—"

She cried incredulously, "Five— After twelve years' work, only— But what've we spent? You're lying, Charlie. You got more tucked away somewhere. Gee, five hundred's less'n you had when we married."

"Have I been living cheaper since?"

"But with no rent—and you being paid good. Where's it gone? It ain't as though you bought me fancy things—"

"Is that a crack? I bought you plenty! We had new cars—"

"But five hundred, Charlie! How'll we live? What'll we do when it's gone? People our age don't find jobs so easy."

"I got plans."

"Plans!" Her voice rose agonizingly. "*Plans*. All you ever had was plans. All you ever promised was plans. And what's become of them? You got fired—you who were going to be manager of this place!"

She fell abruptly silent, but the empty house rang with the words she had screamed. She shrank from the retaliation, but Charlie merely stared at her with odd remoteness, his hands lax at his side.

Presently he turned his back and walked out.

The Danns did not leave the next day, for the packing was too great a task for Roxy to manage alone and Charlie was no help. When urged he would make a trip to the bottle pile for an empty crate or fetch a tool from the cellar or move a piece of furniture; but for the most part he sat in his armchair watching the break-up of his home with brooding eyes. The urgency of leaving had deserted him, and with it any inclination to make the myriad decisions that were necessary, so that Roxy, taxed beyond her ability and strength, had to appeal to the office for advice and assistance.

It bothered Ed immensely. "But I don't know what to tell you," he protested. "Put the things you won't need immediately in storage, by all means. I'll be glad to send some boys over to help you pack, and I'll make all other arrangements, but— Good Lord! I can't tell you where to go. Charlie has to decide that. What are his plans? What—"

"I do' know!" Roxy cried. "He won't tell me. He hardly speaks to me at all any more. I'm half crazy. That, on top of leaving! Honestly—it's got me jittering. Please, Mr. Thomas, what did he do? Isn't there any chance of making it up—of staying? This place is all we've got."

"It was his decision," the manager said. "And, I think, right. If you want to know what's behind it, though, you'll have to ask him."

Roxy was not the only curious one. To the farm it was a bombshell in fact and by implication. Charlie fired! Roxy's naïve admission had told them that. Charlie, one of the oldest employees, a fixture; why, if Charlie could be fired, anyone could be. Avid for details, the farm tried in every way it could to get at the truth. Men came to talk to Charlie and to Ed with direct questions; women, more subtle, commiserated with Roxy

and used indirection; but Charlie talked to no one, Ed kept the secret, and Roxy had never known it.

The farm was left to imagine what it would, and the secrecy of the whole business smelled to many of something unpleasant. Some thought that the manager had acted arrogantly and without cause, and muttered of jealousy and vindictiveness; others felt that Charlie's bickering and complaint had finally alienated him as it had so many others, and that the two had come to a parting over something so trivial that both were ashamed of it.

The barn man's own attitude throughout was indrawn to the point of rudeness. Neither callers nor the boys doing his work for him made any impression; and he sat staring past or through them at the rugless floor, the mantel stripped of its knickknacks, the naked walls. Conversation did not reach him, and, though a touch or a loud voice could claim his attention briefly, he would make only vague, often incoherent, answers to questions. Once he roused from his brooding reverie to say bitterly, "We ain't had this many visitors in the last six years," and several times he asked persistent questioners to "get the hell out and lea' me alone."

The farm did its share to help a desperate and flustered Roxy. Swan Ellis sent Vaccarelli and Oz Tatum to help crate and move furniture. The office furnished boxes and packing materials and, when the time came, provided boys to load the producers' truck with the things for storage and to pack the Danns' more personal possessions into Charlie's car.

The moment for leaving came late in the afternoon of the third day after Charlie Dann's talk with the manager, and it was Ed Thomas himself who brought the barn man's last check across from the office. He found Charlie alone in his devastated living room looking as though he were waiting to be led outside. Through the window Roxy was visible, a small, harried figure getting futilely in the way of the boys who were storing the last things in the car.

Ed said: "I'm afraid it's time to say goodbye. I'm sorry. You're too old an employee and too trusted a one to have had this happen. . . . Charlie!" He touched the other's arm, and then, repeating his name more loudly, shook it. "Look here, man. D'you hear me? You feel all right, don't you?"

Dann's eyes slowly focused. "Oh," he said, "you!"

"I came to say goodbye and bring you your final check—"

"Check," Dann said. "Yes. Yes, I'll need that. To tide over." He took the paper, folded it, put it into his pocket.

"What are your plans, Charlie? Roxy's a bit worried. Where'll you live? Have you any idea where you can get a job?"

A crafty look brightened Charlie's eyes. "I got a job."

"Really?" Ed hesitated, frowning. "You haven't been off the place, have you? When did you get a chance to look for one?"

"There's always openings for a first-class dairyman."

"I see. Well, that's fine. Uh—what firm is it with?"

The crafty look was back. "I guess you'd like to know!"

"Oh, now look here—if you think I'd get in touch with them— Well, perhaps you can't be blamed. I wanted to be sure you were taken care of, that's all." He broke off. "I think Roxy's waving to you. Come on."

He took Charlie's elbow to lead him out, but the man pulled away.

"Take your hands off. I don't know what you're trying to get away with, but I don't like it. You got no right to lay hands on me."

He walked outside draggingly. A knot of farm people—the friendly and the curious—split to make an alley for him to his car. Ed caught a glimpse of Mickey Pratt's face among the others, and it disturbed him.

Roxy said: "You all right, Charlie? You going to be able to drive?" Her eyes were red, and she sniffled between questions.

Some of the old contempt returned to Charlie's face. "I can drive," he growled. "Why not, when we're headed for a place that'll make this one smell? You damn right I can drive."

He climbed across the front seat, showing new energy, but Roxy stood at the asphalt's edge, staring. "You mean that, Charlie? We got some place to go? Where is it? Where we going to spend the night?"

"If it makes any difference, you can stay here. Now that I'm down, you might as well quit me like every other sonofabitch on this place."

"Aw, Charlie, I didn't mean it that way!"

"Then quit squawking and climb in."

She obeyed, and he reached for the ignition, starting the car. Then, with his hand on the gear shift, he paused, his stolid, unrevealing eyes swiveling past Roxy and fastening on someone outside the car.

Mickey Pratt said, "I hadda come and say goodbye, Charlie." \*

Silence. Charlie's cold eyes, Mickey's miserable ones, locked and held.

"Who are you?" Charlie said.

"Aw, hell, don't be like that! I know you hate me, but—"

"Hate you? I never seen you. What're you talking about?"

The slow painful color rose in Mickey's face. "O.K. Only look. Is that right: you know where you're going? Where you can get a job?"

"I *got* a job," Dann said, "but what's that to you? I don't know you and I don't want to, and it's no business of yours. To hell with you!"

He slipped the car into gear and started off with a jerk which made a couple of the bystanders jump. Mickey looked at Ed, his lips trembling.

"He didn't have to do it that way," he said. "Why pretend that—that—"

Ed was looking after the rapidly disappearing car, and his forehead was lined. Finally he sighed. "I wonder if he *was* pretending?"

As they turned into the State Road, Roxy said pleadingly: "Was that true about having a job? Gee, Charlie, that'd be swell! Where is it? Where we going to live and work? You can tell me, huh?"

"It's no secret," he said. "You known it for years. Now it's come true. I'm the new manager of Weyland Meadows Dairy."

Roxy's breath faltered. "B-but—"

Charlie waved an arm toward a side road. "You see that lane?"

"Y-yes. It goes to the dump, doesn't it? But—"

"I killed a man down that road one night. Not the boy I hit with a tire iron, but another one. It's confusing—"

The words trailed off.

Roxy shrank in her seat, and her hands twisted in the hem of her coat.

## PART V

### I

EVENTS began crowding Ed Thomas. He hardly realized it at the time, but in retrospect the ten weeks following March the 24th were to take on the hectic aspects and accelerating pace of a nightmare.

It was that afternoon that Tom North came to see him. Sight of the driver made him scowl, which he promptly regretted, for the swart, chunky route man did not miss it. He asked, "Busy, Ed? Or just sorry to see me?"

"Neither," Ed lied. "Sit down, Tom. Speaking for the boys again?"

"No-o." Tom sat awkwardly, fumbling and dropping his cap. "I—I just want a serious talk. I don't know how to say this, exactly, but— Oh, hell! I've been to you four times now—for them: first about a salesman, next about wages, and then last week twice, once about route cutting and once about those requisitions—"

"I seem to remember," Ed said acidly.

"Ed, you haven't tried to meet us even halfway."

The manager bridled. "That's not so! The salesman was impossible, but your raise is promised. As for the route cutting, a year's guarantee isn't my idea of a satisfactory solution. But we've been over that. I explained—as I explained about the requisitions."

"That they were needed to check the icebox? Yeah—sure. We try to be decent, so all we get is a June raise which we were to get anyway. I guess, no matter what we ask, that'll always be the way of it." Tom's voice shook and stopped.

"That conclusion's hardly warranted."

"Maybe. But the boys look at it this way: You could turn us down on wages, salesman—big things—and we could still hope. But when you said No to dropping those requisitions— That would have cost you nothing. It was little—trifling—"

"If you haven't understood, how can I explain? The icebox—"

"Checks no better now than before this system was started. It wouldn't

hurt you to drop it. It wouldn't mean a thing to you, but it would have kept the boys quiet awhile."

And made other demands harder to refuse later, Ed thought angrily.

Tom went on, "Now they figure if they ever get anything it won't be by being reasonable. There's talk of formal organizing. In other words—trouble."

"Thanks for telling me. Forewarned—"

"If we organize, you'll know it. I'm not here telling tales, but trying to make up my own mind, because I haven't given up hope of a sensible compromise. I thought perhaps a frank talk would help. I'd like—off the record, if possible—the answer to a question."

"I suppose if I make the wrong one, you'll join this—"

"No. I got other angles to figure, too. Because I—I dread what's ahead. I'm—easy-going, see? Hell, I've been at the dairy seven years; you think I'm just waking up to a lot being wrong? No, I've known; only I figured things 'd iron out with time—"

"You were right, Tom. Believe me."

"Something changed my mind. You know what."

"So you threw in with the boys out of revenge?"

"No, but perhaps I discovered that what your employer class has always said is true: If you really want something, you have to get out and work for it; not just ask—and hope."

An awkward way of putting it, Ed thought. He grumbled, "Time finally got you your furnace, didn't it?"

"Yes, and it didn't bankrupt you either—or make you put in a lot of others. In short, you could have given it to me all along. Well, I've got to wondering if you couldn't have given the farm a lot of what it's asked without its really hurting."

"I've had to call the shots as I saw them—"

"Sure. And you turned things down for what seemed to you good reasons. Only, it's been awful easy, Ed, to find reasons for what you didn't want to do. I've done some thinking this winter. Time, I guess, could iron things out if it weren't for people; but it's natural for us to ask for things, and for you to get sore and then stubborn when we keep on asking. Nobody's fault; just the way things are. But it makes it tough."

Ed nodded thoughtfully. "That's very true."

"Myself, I figured you didn't get the importance—to us—of these things we want; that, if it was all calmly explained, you would. That's why I threw in with the boys and came around for them."

"Why you stooged for Barchi, eh?"



"I haven't stooged for anyone, even if I've been doing the public talking recently. Barchi's not making up my mind for me or telling me what to do. And he won't be the one to say my system's failed. There's only one person can do that: you. And that's why I'm here. I want to know: If we keep coming in our present spirit, will we get cooperation—evenually?"

"Good Lord, of course!"

"Even if it costs a little money?"

"I resent that, Tom. Look here. You drivers must be patient too and try to see my side of a problem as you want me to see yours. Will you do that? *Can* you do that?"

Tom shrugged. "It's hard—without some evidence of good faith."

"What if I told you that I'm planning to do something for the farm? that Adrian and Red Walsh are to spend a full month repairing and painting the houses?"

Tom nodded reservedly.

"Then too I've been in touch with Mr. Melius, and he's confirmed your raises, as of June; in fact, you may get more than you asked." Still the driver was silent, and Ed snapped irritably: "Don't you realize you'll get more in the long run by stringing along than by making trouble? I may as well tell you, we're going to expand. Thanks to Eastern Dairies, several local companies may fold this summer, and between you and me, Weyland Meadows will pick up the pieces. Instead of seven routes we may have eight, nine, ten. More business means more money; more money means better wages—if you'll let it. And incidentally—more routes will mean a second relief driver. I don't know if you've ever thought—"

Tom's swarthy face darkened. "You needn't go on. If I stay out of the drivers' organization, it won't be because of a bribe!"

"A bribe? Oh, now look here! . . . Tom, for God's sake—"

But the other, flushed blood-red, had risen. "That's the second time," he said. "And twice is plenty. I guess I should have known."

Ed Thomas was an incurable optimist. Trouble in the offing gave him gloomy and foreboding moments, but having, on the whole, a firm belief in his particular Providence, he worried in fits and starts only. So now, though aware that he had clumsily complicated a situation already delicate, he was inclined to shrug it off, the more so as his mind was busy with the urgent necessity of filling Charlie Dann's place. The barns were running at the mercy of routine and the boys, and two bad counts

and an emergency one night when they ran short of feed were hardly needed to point the danger. Still, finding on short notice a new department head of sufficient caliber proved difficult; fruitlessly, he tried the agricultural college, the experiment station, several other dairies, and his own producers, and the barns were without a boss a full week before the grapevine brought in an applicant who looked promising. By that time his talk with Tom North was a vague and undisturbing memory.

It might have been less so had he been able, on the night of March 28th, to look through the darkness and the slow, soft rain, across the barren, sodden fields to the little swale where the greenhouses had been, where Hal Roane now lived. For there the first meeting of the Weyland Meadows Drivers' Association was being concluded.

Present were six drivers and Bevis, and the vote to organize was quick and unanimous. Unanimous too was Tom North's election as president. Dollar-a-month dues were then voted five to two, but the meeting split three and three between Barchi and Roane for treasurer. When a second ballot had the same result, Tom, who had not voted, suggested Hack Dunty as a compromise candidate, seeking to bind the fat man to their side by committing him publicly. There were objections, but Hal and Barchi caught on, insuring Hack's election; and the first month's dues were paid over, not without misgivings. It was understood that Tom and Dunty were to place the fund next day in a savings account from which it could be drawn only with the signatures of both. If Dunty was aware of this as evidence of mistrust, he did not show it.

Final business was the appointment of a committee to draw up a program. "We had lists of gripes before," Tom said. "This has to be more. It's to be constructive. It's to say what we're working towards. It's to be our constitution." He named Barchi and Bevis.

Barchi said, "How about Ben? If we do anything, we'll want him in." Tom nodded. "Right. I'll take on that job myself."

Significantly, there was no discussion of what they might "do." Even the hotheads failed tonight to yell for action, sensing perhaps that there was no need. Action, at last, was close enough to suit them.

There were those too obtuse to see how the drivers' formal organization differed from the informal one that had existed, or how it could accomplish more; but the farm on the whole made no such mistake. People said repeatedly, "They mean business this time," recognizing something in their attitude that had not been there last summer.

There would be a strike, most agreed. Within a week, some said, while

others had it that the drivers would try organizing other departments first.

The slumbering giant that was the farm's power stirred, but did not waken. "If we got together," some said, "Ed would have to listen to us." But most were not ready; they must see first how the drivers succeeded. Nevertheless, like a partisan crowd at a close contest they felt a vicarious excitement though the more thoughtful shook their heads, knowing it was no game, but a war.

Excitement and foreboding were both wasted; Ed's little Providence had not deserted him. There might some day be drivers who could form a cohesive, effective group, but this was not the time, and these were not the ones. There was a rotten spot in the fruit, and it was Dunty.

It was Saturday afternoon, and the manager looked up to see Bill Bevis waddling into the office. "Oh, yes, Bill! About Dann's house. I was going to send for you. I've hired a barn man, but he's single and won't need it: it's yours if you want it."

Bill grinned. "Sure. I'll break my lease and come out the first of the month." He had been the first to speak for Charlie's house, but had begun to wonder if Ed were sore about his connection with the boys and stalling him. "That ain't what I come for, though."

Ed looked his question, and Bill laid a piece of paper on the desk. There was a single column of figures, seven in all, ranging from \$605.23 at the top to \$964.71 at the bottom. "Dunty's outstanding."

Ed frowned. "Gone up, hasn't it?"

"Yeh. Well, he's got a customer I know pretty well, used to be My-hychyk's—damn good pay. Only in Dunty's book, she's been building up a balance since September. I went around to see her today." He grimaced. "Hell, she claims she's paid up to date. And the bill Hack give her last week don't show no balance either."

"Oh, dear!" Ed said. "Well, I can't say I'm surprised. Guess we'd better suspend him while you check the route."

"That's what I figured," Bevis said.

Hack Dunty did not wait. Sunday was his day off, but when he reported Monday morning and found Bevis still on the truck, he went home, packed a suitcase, and departed in haste.

By that night Bevis had uncovered fifty dollars in shortage, a sum that was to grow to two hundred before week's end and eventually—after

they had weeded claims for days—to nearly three; Dunty had simply left the balances on the book and put the cash into his pocket.

But fifty was enough to send Ed to Peter Thornburg, and it was the lawyer who reported Hack's departure. To Ed's demand for a warrant and a pursuit, he shrugged. "We could track him down—yes—if we spent money. And we could send him to jail. But you'd never recover what you spent, or your original loss either: the man hasn't got a thing but the clothes on his back. Charge the shortage to his account, write it off at the end of the year. It'll help your income tax."

The farm's reaction was complex. People who had set the drivers on a pedestal were disconcerted. Some felt cynically that one man at least had collected what the farm owed him; but most were angry, for Dunty had departed owing plenty of money. Resentment overflowed against the other drivers.

To the organization itself, the defalcation was a desperate blow. It meant action was out until a new route man was hired and could be persuaded to join up; but a more subtle shock, material and moral, had also been administered, for their dues had departed with the fat man. How he had stalled Tom could not be explained, but the money had never gone to the bank. The actual loss was small, but the results in shaken faith were considerable. It put the drivers on the defensive with themselves and with the farm, and they were ashamed. Barely a week after it had been formed, their association was moribund, if not dead.

## II

It was a Wednesday morning. The boys were at school, and Freda Ellis had the house to herself. She had started making the beds but, having reached her own, had flung herself crosswise on it to stare out the window and wish gloomily that things were different.

Outside, it was threatening, with low ragged clouds and a chill, uneasy wind. The naked trees bowed before its gusts, and the crocuses which recent warmth had brought out looked cold. Far down the road someone plodded slowly, heavily toward the farm. She could not tell who.

There were dishes waiting and a morning's ironing afterward, but she was sick of housework. She felt blue and rebellious, and railed against the endlessness of cleaning, sewing, washing, getting three meals a day

because, though it was only part of the nervous unrest that possessed her, it was the most tangible part. Lying there, she wondered what was wrong. Really wrong, underneath. Probably a lot of things. She did not understand herself very well these days.

Once or twice she had wondered if it were Amos Vliet who bothered her. It had been a month and a day since their date, and he had not come back; probably she ought to feel piqued, but actually she could not convince herself that she did. Being with Amos had proved emotionally disturbing in a way she did not entirely enjoy. No, her discontent was not so simple.

The wind rattled the sash, and her eyes focused slowly. The figure on the road was closer now. It was Bet Roane. She moved sluggishly and looked cold. Watching her bulky, swollen form, Freda made a face. Having a baby wasn't pretty, she thought; or dignified. The idea of it made her shudder, and she decided she would never have one.

She sighed. What would she ever have but housework?

The pattern of her life loomed discouragingly, and she dreaded its endless routine without knowing how to change it. It might have been easier had she known what she wanted. Marriage, she had once assumed vaguely, was a girl's future. But marriage, viewed here at the farm with cold appraisal, was not too attractive. She was thinking less of Bet's shapelessness yonder on the road than of homes such as the Ochses', the Heins', and the Danns'.

She had experienced the persistent urge recently to escape from this place where she had been, and was, unhappy; but she did not know how or to what.

She was roused from her gloomy reverie by Bet Roane's turning in at the Ellis walk. Supposing she wanted to borrow something, Freda jumped off the bed, brushed the wrinkles out of her skirt, and raced downstairs.

Bet looked tired and moved awkwardly, but there was a mature serenity about her which Freda sensed rather than understood.

"Come in and sit down. You look all tired out."

Bet said quietly: "My baby's on the way. Would you mind—"

"Oh, gee! . . . Oh, gee, Bet!"

"Would you telephone the doctor for me?"

"Oh, but you shouldn't have walked over! You shouldn't have—"

"I thought I'd better. By the time Hal gets home this afternoon—well—I don't know much about this business. I was afraid to be alone." She did not look afraid; she did not even look nervous.

"Gee, I should think! I'll call the doctor, an' then take you home in dad's car."

Freda was jumping with excitement, and her voice on the telephone must have made Mat Caron smile. He said he would be out.

"Take her home, put her to bed, and stay with her," he said.

Overwhelmed with responsibility, Freda got Bet to the car. "I don't see how you can be so calm," she cried. "Look at me: I've come out without my coat, even. Just a minute!" She raced back for it, and then, when she returned, "I have to drive slow, don't I? I guess you have to be careful about—things."

"I won't break. Not now."

But the road was full of spring potholes and Freda drove at a walk all the way to the greenhouses. Her solicitude in helping Bet into the house made the pregnant woman smile. Freda pressed her toward the stairs. "Come on. I'll help you to bed."

But Bet said: "Not yet. The doctor's coming. There'll be people here. I have to straighten the house."

"I'll do it. I'd be glad to."

Bet shook her head. "It's just odds and ends. I want to do it myself. I know where things go. There's nothing that can hurt me."

"But—but what if—if—"

"I think there'll be a little warning," Bet said wryly.

Freda, by hurrying, managed to do more than her share, but only when the house was in perfect order would Bet go upstairs. Once she was safely abed, Freda felt queerly, illogically easier, as though it somehow secured the status quo till the doctor came.

Caron was slow, and the waiting was difficult. Freda yearned to do things for Bet, but the woman wanted nothing. The girl chattered at her; but even talking was hard, for her attention was distant.

Mat Caron arrived in due course, and Freda let him in. "Well, look who's here!" He eyed her appraisingly, their last series of meetings in his mind. "How goes it, girl? Haven't seen you in some while."

Freda guessed she was all right, but Caron's eyes probed searchingly before he turned to Bet Roane and his examination.

Finally he said to Bet: "You'll do. You'll do. But you've a long way to go yet. You must have been in a rush to see my handsome mug."

"I don't know much about these things," she said apologetically.

"You'll learn! No, we won't get real action till late afternoon. I'll be back with a nurse before then. Maybe Freda could stay with you in case you want anything—"

He left the girl bug-eyed with responsibility and excitement.

When he had gone she remembered her father's lunch. "Oh, dear, I ought to run home and leave a note for him. He'll worry. I'll stop at the office too and have Carly reach Hal for you—"

"No! No, don't do that! He mustn't know about this till he comes off the route. Please!" Bet was urgent.

"Gee, of course! Only I don't understand. It seems funny."

"You don't know Hal," Bet said.

Kenny Ihloff cried, "Hiya, daddy—congratulations!"

Hal halted with one foot out of the truck and stared at him.

Kenny grinned. "Better go buy the cigars. You're goina need 'em."

"Going to? Y' mean—"

"Hey, whassa matter? Y' look green!" And Kenny whooped, "Lookit! Hey, guys, lookit! Hal's havin' his first baby! Hey, Hal—snap out of it! You'll live! Hell, after it's over, you won't even know you suffered. Ask me. I had one, didn't I?"

"Go to hell!" Hal Roane climbed stiffly onto the dock and reached for a case. "Come on. Let's get the truck unloaded."

"Aw, go on home! I'll unload for you this once."

"Nuts! Here: I'm returnin' four halves of heavy, two butter—"

"Go on! Y' needn't hang around. Go get a drink. Celebrate!"

But Hal did his own unloading, and seemed in no hurry either.

Up in the drivers' room, ignoring the congratulations of Jake and Barchi, he said to Carly Groce, "Whyn't you tell me when I called in?"

"I didn't know! Nobody did till this afternoon. Then Swan found out and some of the women went over."

"How—how long's it been going on?"

"Oh, since early, I guess."

"Yeah? Knew she'd have a tough time. Oh, goddam it to hell—"

"Go on home. Turn in your money tomorrow. I'll fix your sheet."

"Nah-h! I got first-of-the-month checks to get rid of."

He settled himself at a desk. The boys began a mildly ribald stream of chatter, and presently Bevis, Tom North, and Chief Myhychyk drifted in, heard the good news, and took up the missionary work. Jake and Lew Barchi finished and departed, promising to call for their cigars in the morning, but still Hal lingered, surly and red around the ears from the continued kidding.

He checked in in due course, but then returned to his seat.

Carly said, "You better go on home, guy. They may want you."

"Yeah. In a minute!" He began rearranging his route book. The boys watched oddly. When, finishing with the book, he began making out bills that were not needed till Sunday, Myhychyk suddenly bellowed, "Goddam it to hell, I'll bet he's *scared* to go home!"

Hal's usually immobile face twisted, and the boys, realizing that the Chief was right, leapt to the attack.

Hal's nerves frazzled and exploded. "Shut up! Shut up, goddam it. Sure it's funny. Pull out your old wheezes. Tell me Mat Caron never lost a father yet. O.K.—but you're damn right I'm afraid to go home! I know what having a kid can do to a girl. My wife's over there maybe dying, but go on, have your joke! Guess you'd die laughing if you were only near enough to hear her scream!"

He had swayed to his feet and was pounding the table. For a second they thought that this was funny too. Bevis started to wind up his high, hysterical giggle, and the Chief sucked in a guffaw, but then Tom North stepped in.

"Lay off. For all we know, Bet might be in trouble. Let's take it easy till afterwards. But look, Hal: you gotta go home sometime. You know that. You're all done here, so what say I ride over with you—"

"Take your hand off me! I can go by myself."

Bevis said, "Hell, Hal, we shouldn't 've rode you. We all been through it—all but the Chief—and worried too, I guess. It's only afterwards—Aw, you better go home now, like Tom says."

"All right—I'm going! Only I don't need anybody's help." He might have been a drunk asserting his sobriety; and as though he were one Tom carefully handed him his cap and gloves and followed him to the stairhead to watch him down.

Driving down the County Road at a pace that crawled, Hal was tempted to pass his house and head for town, there to get so blind-drunk he could forget what was happening. He ached for a drink, but uncertainty and fear pulled him home almost as much as they drove him away. At the entrance to the lane, he must have waited five minutes, undecided, before sight of the Chief's car coming up behind him spurred him into moving.

The doctor's coupé was in the drive, and Hal cut his motor and sat listening. There was no sound, yet he dreaded going in.

He thought: I'll drive back out; I'll go and get drunk.

Then a face appeared at the living-room window, Vic Stewart's, and sight of it focused Hal's temper. He went in, slamming the door.

"What are you doing here?"



"I got the afternoon off," Vic said evenly, "in case I could be of any help—you not being around."

"O.K. So I'm here now, and you can scram!"

Dr. Caron came in. "Here at last, eh?"

"Whaddaya mean, at last? I just got through work— I just heard—"

"O.K., O.K. Anyway, you're here. Better go up and say Hello."

"Is—is it here?"

"Uh? . . . Oh, no! I meant, to your wife. No, your child is taking his own sweet time. It'll be awhile yet."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just a born loafer." Caron picked up his hat and coat. "I'll be back, couple hours. Be plenty of time, and I'm busy." Then, as Hal broke into protest: "Now, now, now. Take it easy. Everything's all right. A little delay doesn't mean anything. Now suppose you go up, say Hello, and sit with her a few minutes?"

Hal collapsed weakly. "No. No, I don't think I'll do that."

"You don't want to see her? . . . Well—she might want to see you."

"Naw. She's got things on her mind. What'd she want of me?"

"Seems to help a woman to hold her husband's hand a minute."

"Well, she can go— To hell with it!"

Caron frowned, then said quietly, "You're going up, Roane."

Hal flushed, and his will grappled the doctor's; but, already burnt out with strain and emotion as it was, it yielded quickly. "Oh, all *right*! I'll go! Only keep your hands off me! Jesus Christ, everybody trying to make me do things!"

The bedroom seemed crowded. Freda Ellis was there, close beside Bet's bed, and at the window stood an older woman, the nurse. Bet smiled thinly as Hal came to the door. "Come on in. It's all right."

"I can't stay."

He kept well away from the bed, thankful she had not put out her hand; he dreaded getting close to her, much less touching her. Probably she guessed how he felt; to give her credit, she usually did, and on the whole had managed to stay off his toes. She was not a bad kid, and he felt tough about getting her into this mess.

"How d'ya feel?" He had to say something. "Bad, ain't it?"

"Not very. Not yet."

Silence. "I hear you been at it ever since morning?"

"Be lucky if I'm not at it all night too," she said, and smiled. "The doctor says I ain't seen nothin' yet."

"For God's sake, don't lie there and grin about it!"

"There's no point doing anything else."

He said in a choked voice, "I have to go get a drink."

"Aw, no, Hal. Don't. You'll only get tight. Please! Not tonight—"

"Nuts!"

"Besides, I'd worry if I knew you were out d-driving—" Her voice pulled up unexpectedly on the last word, and her face changed.

He cried sharply, "What's the matter? Bet!"

"You better go. But don't get tight. Please! Just for me. Just—" She caught her lip with her teeth as Hal stared in fascinated horror. She whispered: "Get out, Hal. Please—get out!"

"Can't anyone do anything?" he said. "You, nurse! Can't you see she's in pain? Do something!"

The nurse looked at her watch. "Give her your hand to pull on."

He saw Bet's shoulders draw and set beneath the blankets.

"Christ!" he said. "Jesus Christ! Let me out of here."

Caron had gone, and Stewart made no move to stop him. He merely sighed, somewhere between sadness and contempt, as he heard Hal race his motor and start up, wheels spinning on the dirt of the lane.

The night was black beyond the window, and it was after ten o'clock. Freda Ellis threw her magazine down and said: "Vic, I'm plain scared! It's been so long. We keep hearing Dr. Caron and the nurse—but nothing else. I don't know how Bet stands it. If it were me, I'd simply howl. It's horrible, inhuman; I don't know how girls can get married, facing it. I know I won't—ever!"

Vic, full length on the couch, chuckled, stirred restlessly, then sat up listening. "I thought I heard something."

They sat in silence, trying to trace the pattern of footsteps upstairs. Then a door opened, and Caron's voice called, "Freda?"

"Yes? Is there something wrong? Is there anything I can do?"

"Come up a minute, please."

She hurried fearfully, but there was a broad grin awaiting her. Caron stood in the upper hall with something in his arms!

Freda's breath checked and raced.

"Hold this for me for a minute. Careful!" He passed her the bundle. "I'll be back in a minute."

She could feel the life, the activity, beneath the muffling blanket and was half afraid of it, half thrilled. She could feel its warmth against her arm through all the wrappings and she could hear the jerky sound of its breathing.

Looking guiltily around and finding herself alone, she lifted the blanket, and there it was, a wrinkled, flushed face, eyes squinted, mouth wide, a dark powdering of hair, like Bet's, above its tiny ears . . .

Freda's heart swelled till it choked her throat.

She thought in a panic that it was going to cry, but its mouth closed, the incredibly soft lips folding into each other sleepily, the lower nestling beneath the tiny drooping curve of the upper. One arm stirred the blanket, and a chubby hand with incredibly tiny fingers outspread appeared and waved vigorously. Freda tucked it gently back, her own hand trembling, her throat stiff. Here it was, a perfect, tiny, brand-new human being, worth—it occurred to her—one day of suffering in any woman's life. She held the child gently, though her impulse, half understood, was to crush it to her.

The door opened, and Caron said, "How do you like him?"

"Oh, he's—he's—wonderfull" The tone, the shine in her eyes, made the doctor smile. "It—it *is* a he?"

"Um-hum. Thought you'd like him. But Mrs. Roane wants him now."

"Is she—"

"Oh, fine! She had a fair time of it; prolonged, but not bad. Now—I'm afraid I'll have to take him."

The reluctance with which she surrendered the baby made Caron's smile broaden; he was well pleased with his little experiment. He said:

"Cheer up. You can see him again. And any girl who wants one of her own has only to find the right man and marry him."

"I—I know," Freda said feebly. "Gee, he's—he's awful sweet."

It was late. The liquor was lead on Hal's stomach, making him sickish instead of high. He felt ugly, in the mood to bash someone's head in. Above all, he wished he were abed.

The only light in the house was in the living room, so either it was all over or they had had to take her to the hospital. Probably it was that, he thought morosely, opening the car door.

Vic Stewart lay smoking, listening to the tuned-down radio, and did not bother to get up. "So you got back finally? Tight?"

"Damn right. What they done with her?"

"She's upstairs, sleeping."

"'S it all over?"

"Yeh. And congratulations on your son. Seven pounds odd and very chipper." He said it flatly, not meaning it.

"An'—an' Bet?"

"She's fine."

Hal sucked in a deep breath. "O.K.! Now get a hell out."

Vic's anger flickered. "All afternoon and evening I been doin' your job, so now—when you drag home plastered—I can scram. Is that it?"

"What'm I supposed to do? Kiss you?"

"You could be decent enough to say 'Thanks.'"

"To hell with it. Maybe you got reasons o' your own. Maybe you'd like to take my place here? Maybe you already taken it—"

Vic crushed out his cigarette carefully, not answering.

"Or maybe," Hal said viciously, "it was me that took yours! Maybe you got an interest in that kid I wouldn't know about?"

Vic rose and walked past him to the door. "Come on," he said.

"You knew her longer'n me!" Hal followed uncomprehendingly into the night. "An' she uz no virgin when I met her—"

"Put 'em up," Vic told him.

"Huh? . . . Oh, it's a fight you want? Well, that suits me fine—"

"I can't wait while you talk about it," Vic said, and struck.

Hal hit the ground with a bellow of rage and came up, both fists swinging, but wide open. One quick short jab snapped his head back, a second exploded in the pit of his stomach, sending the breath out of him in a whoosh. This time he did not bounce.

Looking down at him, Vic said: "That wasn't fair. You're drunk, and I could tear you to pieces. But it's not all you deserve; so, if you'll resent it when you're soberer, I'll beat you to a proper pulp!"

The final blow had had a disturbing effect on Hal's liquor, and he was being dog-sick. When he finally crawled indoors, it was in a chastened mood. He reached the couch before he passed out.

Ben Goetz stirred sleepily. "Sonia?"

"Um?"

"How long those two been married?"

Sonia's voice in the dark was ironic. "Since September. Why?"

After an adequate silence, Ben began to chuckle.

### III

THE spring day was so mild that Lew Barchi, sitting on the creamery stoop, his back against the windscreen, his game leg aswing and his toe scuffing the traprock of the drive, was not cold even though the sun was behind the building. He had been there for some time and not without purpose.

Presently a young man jogged down the office stairs and emerged beside him. Barchi nodded in a friendly way. "Get the job?"

"I guess so. Anyway, I'm riding with your relief man—Bevis?—starting in the morning."

"Good."

The newcomer descended to the drive but made no move to leave. The cripple considered him briefly, foreseeing difficulties.

He was taller than Myhychuk, a handsome youngster with curly brown hair topping a gold-tanned face which had a fleshy masculine beauty that Lew instinctively mistrusted. Moreover, he had a wedge-shaped body that took clothes, and a flair for them that made his conservative business suit look more than merely tailor-fitted, spotless, and pressed.

A sissy-britches, Barchi thought; no worker. Not so good.

"I'm Barchi," he said. "Lew Barchi. Route Number One. Next to Bill Bevis, I been here longer'n any other driver."

"Pleased to meet you, Lew. My name's Roberts. Sam Roberts."

He stuck out his hand, and Barchi changed his mind; it was a good hard hand, one that had done honest work. The grip was hard, too. Studying him more closely, Barchi reluctantly relinquished his prejudices. Still, the man was educated and might think and react oddly. He sighed. He had hoped for a familiar type to deal with.

Still, the bluff had to be tried. Only a miracle—such as the immediate adherence of the new driver—could revive the organization.

"Glad to have you with us," he said. "You'll meet the boys tomorra. Great bunch. You'll like 'em! . . . Oh, by the way: we're organized, you know."

"No, I didn't. What union—the A. F. of L. Teamsters?"

It put Barchi on the defensive, and he sounded sullen. "Na-ah. Local. We're the Weyland Meadows Drivers' Association. Dues a dollar a month—low enough! We're out for better wages and working conditions. All the boys belong, and each new driver who comes, we ask to join."

"Thanks very much. I'll think it over."

Barchi drew breath and plunged. "Look: you don't get it. To work here, you *gotta* join."

"Really? Mr. Thomas didn't say a thing about a closed shop. He didn't mention your union at all."

"So what?"

"Considerable. Suppose I don't choose to play along."

"Then you don't get no benefits or any voice in—"

"Naturally. But the company wouldn't discharge me, I take it?"

"Well, we got no agreement yet. But"—Barchi made it tough—"there's plenty ways we can make your life miserable."

Roberts said coolly: "When your boss tells me it's a closed shop, I'll join. Otherwise—until I've looked around, anyway—no, thanks! . . . So long, Barchi. Glad to have met you."

Well, Barchi thought with a sigh, that was that.

Ruth and Bill Bevis had moved into the Dann house the first of the month, but when the Goetzes called on the following Sunday they were still only partially settled. The day was unseasonably warm, so the four of them decided to sit outside. They had drowsed in the sun in lawn chairs perhaps half an hour when a car stopped before the house. The new man, Sam Roberts, was behind the wheel.

As the girls preened hair and clothes covertly, Bill yelled a greeting and brought another chair. Sonia, aware of Roberts' potential power in the critical state of the Drivers' Association, studied him narrowly while he crossed the lawn and was introduced. His somewhat theatrical good looks were no more reassuring to her than they had been to Barchi; she doubted if he had a serious thought in his head.

Roberts said he had come out to get acquainted. "I've been riding with Bill three days, and all I know is, he can deliver milk!" He was especially glad that Ben was there. "You have to meet men out of working hours to get to know them. The way I want to, anyway. Besides, it's given me the pleasure of meeting your wives. . . . The boys seem a decent bunch, what little I've seen of them. I've only talked with one—this Barchi."

Sonia said, "Our stormy petrel."

Sam told about the encounter, and Bevis guffawed.

Sonia, flushing, cried, "Isn't that like him!"

"He was pulling a fast one," Ben said. "There's a sort of union, but no one *has* to join it. All the boys have, though—except me. I—well, I don't like trouble. Even Bill's with them most of the way."

"How are you making out?"

Bill snorted. "We aren't. That's why we organized—we're fed up and about ready to get tough. At least we were till Dunty beat it with our dues. That—well—"

"They been talking soft since," Ben grinned. "With me out and you not in, they'll make no progress for a while more, either."

"Then that accounts for Barchi. He's at the head of it, I suppose?"

Sonia said, "He's behind it," one jump ahead of Bill's "No—Tom is." She added: "Tom North's a convert, a zealous one, but Barchi—"

Bill shook his head. "You got Tom wrong. Hell, he's a leader. The boys wouldn't trust Barchi around a corner, but Tom—"

"The whole bunch of you," Ben said mildly, "are being led by the nose. Tom's leading where Lew Barchi, Hal, and the Chief want him to lead. They've got him believing there's only one eventual answer here—a strike—and he's getting you into it without knowing why himself."

Sonia said, "Ben, I didn't know you saw it so clearly."

"What are the complaints?" Roberts asked, and listened to the indictment with attention but no obvious sympathy. Sonia knew suddenly that he was here to get exactly this information, and it surprised her, altering her opinion of him somewhat. He was trying to define the situation into which he had stepped, perhaps trying to choose his side.

When Bill was through, he said mildly, "Um. Interesting."

"You going to join up with us?"

Roberts shrugged. "I'm not strong for unionism."

Sonia tingled with relief, for this seemed to place his sympathies. It could mean the association was dead and Ben safe.

"What's wrong with it?" Bill demanded. "Guy gets nowhere by himself, but people'll pay attention when there's a gang of him."

"I'm not strong for gangs either."

"Oh, hell! I mean, all we want is a square deal."

"Your notion of that might be the farm's disaster. Suppose you asked wages so high it must lose money or raise the price of milk—quit meeting competition?"

Bill waved both hands in the air. "You sound like Ed Thomas. Damn it, we're not trying to cut our own throats. We're not asking anything that'll put us out of business—"

"Would you leave the place enough to buy, say, new routes, if the chance offered? build new buildings? grow?"

"Sure, sure. Hell, we know where our bread and butter is."

"Then getting a square deal isn't all you're after. You're after a business that is solvent and growing as well."

"I guess I didn't say what I meant. All we're fighting for is to get what we figure's our share from a business both solvent and growing."

"What makes you think fighting's the best way to get it?"

Bill looked a bit blank. "What other way is there?"

"Well—what is it that Management wants out of a business?"

"Profit—basically."

Roberts grinned. "O.K. And what's needed to make a profit?"

Sonia said, "Solvency and growth."

"What it amounts to," Roberts said, "is that Labor wants what Management wants, though usually neither is bright enough to see it. If so, they should be cooperating, not fighting. Why use the ingenuity and energy on an internal rift which could be used to so much better advantage in pursuing a common gain?"

Ben said, "But when the office won't cooperate, what can we do but fight?"

"Force is a pretty unconvincing argument."

"I convinced a few with it." Bill grinned reminiscently.

"You've won your victories, sure, but punching a man's nose has never proved your point. All it's done is ask retaliation."

Sonia agreed emphatically, but the men seemed puzzled.

"You don't see it," Roberts said, half questioning.

Ben insisted, "But when the office won't do its part—"

And Bill said: "Hell, you get to a point— Take this place. The boys need a salesman. Well, Ed Thomas was for it but turned the idea down all the same. Why? Because we got tough? Hell, no! We *didn't* get tough. He turned us down because we dared butt in on his sacred privilege of making decisions in his own goddam time. Hell, it makes you sore!" And he was sore. "It was stubbornness, and that's all. Why the hell shouldn't we get hardboiled too?"

Roberts spread his hands. "There you are. You got punched. Did it convince you you were wrong? And, if you punch back, will it convince him you were right? Or will it start a battle that'll injure you both?"

Sonia said swiftly: "Mr. Roberts, they talk as though it were all the manager's fault. It isn't. It wasn't he who 'punched' first. They did, last summer; they threatened before even trying reasonable argument—"

Bill said: "If you're going back to ancient history, what was it made us think of striking in the first place? We had plenty kicks—"



"And weren't serious about one of them! You were led into it by Barchi and Myhychyk. And you're still being led!"

"Leaders, like seeds," Roberts suggested, "won't grow on barren rock. Barchi wouldn't have made the headway he has if it weren't for the rootholds the farm left him."

"Right!" Bill said. "And if he'd never existed we'd still have a leader today after what the farm done to Tom North."

They told Roberts the story of Nancy.

Roberts said: "There seems to have been stupidity on both sides. Usually is when a mess develops. But then, if Business had been really foresighted, it would have shared responsibility as well as profit with its men long before this."

"Ed's always intended to share profits," Sonia protested. "If they'd only given him a chance instead of making him angry—"

"But they were tough—so he was tougher—and now they must be tougher still. I know. It's human nature. It's the insanity of force."

Ben said: "If he always intended to, he should 've given us a token. Any little thing—like fixing up the houses. When we couldn't even get painting done, how could we hope for greater things?"

Sonia remembered Clint Matlock's saying something similar long ago.

Ben continued: "Management's never been willing to listen to argument. If Labor had merely gone on arguing, it'd be no better off than at the start of the century. All the progress it's made has been by force. Perhaps force has never convinced anyone, as you say; yet the most conservative government today wouldn't repeal our gains. Even if every union vanished, Business wouldn't deny us what we've won."

Roberts made a face. "I wonder. I'm no prophet. I've heard Business talk for publication, patting Labor graciously on the head. And I've heard some individual businessmen talk in private—but maybe they weren't typical. I only know this: people who, over a span of forty years, have been forced humiliatingly from position after long-held position, from privileges and rights firmly believed to be theirs could hardly like it.

"Right now the Union is riding high; it talks as high-handedly to government as Big Business ever did, but, so far, Business has fought back individually, clumsily, not recognizing its own weapons. Suppose it organizes, as Labor has done. D'you think you've seen its money and its press at work trying to capitalize on the unions' many mistakes? You've seen nothing to what could happen if the campaign were seriously

planned and organized. D'you think the blacklist's a weapon? Think what it could be in the hands of a real organization!"

Sonia said: "They'd never do it. You know they wouldn't!"

"Oh, do I?" Roberts said, and grinned impudently. "I may not be strong for unions, but my pet hate is the other side. Individual business, industry, production, the capitalistic system—O.K., I'm for 'em. But that little tin god called Business—no!"

"But I—don't understand. What's the difference?" Sonia was bewildered. She had had the man very satisfactorily catalogued on her own side, and this was disconcerting.

"The difference is between the institution, and the ways of those who run it," he said. "No, neither side must rule. A balance must be struck."

"What kind of balance?"

But Bill Bevis said: "This general talk's O.K., but I only know what's happened here. What's this you been saying got to do with us?"

"This: You had a case against the dairy; out of animal high spirits you pressed it prematurely, and it didn't work; later you tried decent argument, but by then the office was angry and stubborn and wouldn't listen. So you organized, only to get a setback when this Dunty ran off with your money. That's past and present. But is anyone under the illusion that it's the end of the story?"

Sonia said, "It could be, if they'd use their heads."

"With their grievances still existing? With Thomas still obviously opposed and the trial of strength unsettled?"

"No," Bill said. "The boys are low, but they'll be high again."

Roberts nodded. "They may have to wait till I'm fired—or converted; but your union will come back. Then it's a question of time. Concessions may postpone it, so may personalities, but eventually *der Tag* will come. There'll be a strike or a threatened strike, a victory or a compromise—and a momentary peace. But can you conceive of its ending there, either?"

Bill chuckled irreverently. "If we win!"

"Can you? Would the manager take a licking and quit?"

"What could he do about it?"

"Suppose he and other milk dealers made an agreement on basic standards throughout the milk business. Imagine being fired here as troublemakers and finding yourself blacklisted by every dairy in the state so that you had to move away to get work."

"The boys wouldn't like it. They'd find some way out."

"Exactly: so do you get some idea of the fight that's ahead? What'll

happen to Weyland Meadows Dairy, on which your security is dependent, while the boys and Ed Thomas battle it out?"

Bill scratched his head. "We'll lick 'em," he said vaguely.

Sonia shivered, and his wife said quickly: "You're cold, dear. It isn't as warm out as it was. We'd better go in."

"I'm not cold. It was a—a reaction. Maybe I'm scared."

Ben hooted, but Roberts said soberly: "A lot of people should be more scared than they are. The trouble hasn't started."

Bill protested, "What could we do but what we done, though?"

"And what can we do now?" Ben added. "It's gone so far already—"

Roberts shrugged. "That's up to the thinkers, I guess. I'm only sure unions have done all they can. We've got to find a new solution whose basis will be cooperation, not opposition, between the two halves of industry."

## IV

ED THOMAS had been night-walking. He had watched a great fat moon rise orange-red behind the orchard and mount slowly till the world was silver, had tasted the soft spring air, smelled the earth, sensed the life stirring in the naked trees and shrubs. Wandering back, nostalgic and mellow, he had gravitated to the long silvered bulk of the new creamery, mere sight of which could bring elation surging and swelling in his throat.

"Dreaming too?" a voice asked.

The manager, startled, saw Clint Matlock among the shadows.

"Looks nice with the moon on it."

"Dreaming, I suppose," Ed admitted. "It means so much. People here don't realize. That's the future, Clint: success, money, happiness for all of us. I'm wondering how to make them understand."

Clint had no answer, but the silence was companionable.

"Things are straightening out," Ed added. "Eastern Dairies hasn't hurt us. The plant's done. Soon I can afford to soothe the drivers with a raise. The question of a barn head seems to be answered."

"The new man working out?"

"Yes. He's still cleaning up the mess Dann left, and there's some friction—the boys trying to see what they can get away with; but he can

handle it and them. He's full of schemes—may need some holding down; been muttering about new drainage systems, blue-stoned areaways—God knows what. Bit hipped on cleanliness too.” Ed chuckled. “I caught him rigging some showers in the upper barn. He's going to make his boys use 'em every day, keep hair cut and fingernails clean, leave their work clothes and shoes in the barn between milkings. Lord! That's an experiment I want to watch—knowing the boys.”

“Should have been tried long ago,” Clint said.

“And he talked me out of three sets of coveralls and daily laundry service.”

“Good Lord, no! How?”

“Now see here! He seems to have the idea I'm tight about money—and so do you. It's not that. But we have to economize where we can—”

“How did he do it?” Clint insisted.

“Oh—talked around till I said any money he saved me could be spent in his own way; then told me he'd bought some hay we'd needed, at about a third off the market. Found a farmer, only three miles from here, who's quitting business, selling land, equipment, herd, supplies. He got a bargain all right. Well, what could I do?”

Clint laughed aloud.

“Such fuss over those fool boys,” Ed muttered. “He has delusions of grandeur about 'em. I told him what they were, but he claims they're not a bad lot.”

“That's true. Many a dairy hires criminals, perverts, idiots, anyone, for its barns. These boys are fairly decent, steady. They just lack something: a spark, enthusiasm, ambition; a goal, perhaps.”

“They're morons; but, whatever they are, he plans to teach 'em dairying!”

“What? Oh, he means, I suppose, that in spite of doing the work, they don't fundamentally know their business. No. But—how does he expect to teach it to them?”

“Well,” Ed said, “he's got a microscope.”

“Yes?”

The hesitation lengthened. “He suggested he use it for daily tests on our incoming milk, both from barns and producers—”

“Whoosh! Big job—but one that needs doing.”

“Perhaps. I told him it wasn't *his* job, anyway, but he—insisted. What could I do but offer him the room in the new plant which we planned as a lab eventually—”

“Swell!”

"Then," Ed said, not quite happily, "he said he also planned to test the milk from each individual string at the barns and post the counts there for the boys to see. The best average for a week he'd reward with time off, special privileges; things, as he put it, that"—he stumbled briefly—"won't cost the farm any money. Now, damn it, Clint! Have I that kind of reputation? or the sort of personality that—"

Clint laughed. "Don't make me answer that!"

"I told him we could afford cash prizes—he kind of got to me, I guess—but he refused for now. Said they wouldn't do any good because, as he put it, 'morale can't be bought.'" Ed sighed. "He should talk to Whart, who thinks it can be bought—and forced, too."

"The man's like a breath of fresh air," Clint said. "I like the sound of him."

"He thinks he can get the boys excited over these privileges without even calling it a contest. He thinks they'll start asking questions and learn, without realizing they are being taught, how to improve their counts with cleanliness and care. Once this shows improvement, he'll start on volume and butterfat records, teach them how to adapt diet to the individual animal. And so on. I don't know. This subtle stuff—What do you think? Is he a crackpot?"

"I think he's a man several sizes too big for this place."

The manager turned sharply. "Oh, now—"

"I hope I'm wrong, because, from what you've said, I'd like to see him stay. I think we need him."

"He'll stay. Why shouldn't he? I told you the barn question was settled, didn't I? We'll just have to be careful he doesn't talk us into too many expensive schemes."

"D'you really want to know what I think about production, Ed? You should stop making it the stepchild of the business. It'd pay dividends. And I'd get rid of the producer system. I'm sick of its wastefulness, its turnover, the danger it is to public health and—through that—to us, the constant labor of keeping twenty or thirty loosely attached farmers in line."

"So am I. So what?"

"Let's get the production end in our own hands."

"How? We couldn't possibly produce all the milk we need here."

"No, nor buy outright enough farms to produce it all—the cost would be too staggering. But if you picked up one here, one there—this one you spoke of that sold us the hay, perhaps—if you watched auctions and forced sales, kept an eye out for small farmers failing for lack of expert

knowledge and good management; if you began buying them up as you could afford to—

"We can produce milk for less than we can buy it—you know that. And your costs would decrease in proportion with every new farm you bought or leased, because you'd soon be buying feed by the trainload instead of the ton, and all equipment and supplies would become bulk purchases. Modern breeding and feeding would give you more milk from a given herd than any individual farmer could get, and modern methods and equipment would cut labor cost on the same herd. You'd get more milk, richer milk, cleaner milk, and all for less money. Our set-up is ideal for it, into the bargain, Ed."

Surprised at his own enthusiasm, and uncertain how this, his first attempt to contribute to farm policy, might be received, Clint paused. The manager made no answer for some time. The night was beginning to cool, and Clint moved restlessly once or twice.

Then Ed Thomas said quietly: "I'm not sure but you've found the next logical step, Clint. We don't want to plunge, of course. It needs thinking out, figures. I'd have to talk it over with Melius, naturally—" The sentence drifted off. The noise of peepers was loud in the night. "There'd be plenty of headaches, aside from purchase price. Staffing so many places—"

"Well, the boys are learning dairying, aren't they?" Clint smiled. "Reward the most promising with a six months' course at agricultural school and a branch farm afterward. It'd give them their goal, and us a chance to run our branches under our own system, not a whole mess of different ones brought in from outside."

"The most promising," Ed repeated. "Who, among those boys—"

"Well—offhand—what about Donny Ochs or Mickey Pratt?"

Ed snorted. "Catch me spending the farm's money on another of the Ochses! Mickey? Well, he never impressed me much. . . . I don't know. The scheme has difficulties—" He shook his head.

The two men stood in silence staring at the creamery, Ed Thomas's monument of brick and steel. Under a moon now riding high, its simple lines and unbroken white walls had a certain beauty.

"Just the same, there's the germ of an idea there. We're growing, and those are the lines we must think along. . . . A chain-farm system. . . . Tell you what: Jerry'll be down for the creamery opening. I'll have the quarterly statement which he'll like. He should be in a good mood. I'll broach this to him." The manager grew thoughtfully silent. "You know, it might be a good idea to pick up that farm we've been talking about,

whether we plunge for the larger scheme or not. It couldn't do us any harm. It's close. It's— Of course it might mean a little delay in coming to terms with the route men . . .”

Clint frowned.

A pulse beat in Ed's throat. It was a night for dreams, and the yeast of an idea was beginning to work.

That same evening found Amos Vliet at the Ellises' by Swan's invitation, and for them too it proved to be a night of inspiration, a night when the wildest schemes were possible and the highest goals within reach. Closeted in the office-study with a bottle of apple, the two usually reticent men found it surprisingly easy to talk freely. They were more alike in attitude than either would have guessed; and, having taken each other's measure, they discovered an increasing mutual respect. Swan could envy the younger man's energy and get a kick out of his confidence, while Amos could admire Swan's quiet strength and thorough knowledge of his job. For two hours they dreamed plans, and both were thoughtful when they emerged.

Freda, pretty and crisp in a fresh house dress, was waiting and, after Swan had said a tactful good night, went out on the porch with the guest.

“What a gorgeous night, Amos!” She stood at the porch rail, gazing up at the brilliant moon and the pallid stars. “So warm you don't even need a coat. Imagine—in April!”

He said, “Um-m-m,” and sniffed the earthy smell of spring.

“It's so beautiful. Let's sit on the steps. I've—I've something to ask you.”

The moonlight betrayed his quizzical look; but he sat down facing her, his back against the porch rail. “All right. What?”

“It's about what you said the night we—we were out together. I mean about this place, and about the future. You said no young person should live here: that I ought to get away—make up my mind what I wanted and go after it.”

“Must have been one of my brighter moments. What about it?”

“Well, it's not so easy to decide what you want. I've thought and thought, and it's—hard! So I figured out first what I *didn't* want. First: to go on keeping house for daddy and the boys till it's too late for anything else. Oh, I know: lots of women 've been proud to take care of their families at the expense of their own hopes; but I'm not the sacrificing sort, I guess.”

“Neither am I.”

“That's the first thing. Next,” Freda said very firmly, “I don't want to

get married—at least, not to anybody here. And, unless I leave here, who else could I ever meet? Anyway, if I got married, it'd only mean more dishes, more washing, more housework—and I'm sick of that."

Amos chuckled, his earlier note of reserve gone. "All right. No house-keeping, no wrestling some poor unwilling devil to the altar. So what'll you do?"

"Get a job. I'm going to have a career." She saw the gentle nodding of his head. "Only I don't know what kind. That's why I had to talk to you: you started me thinking like this, so you'll have to help me decide."

"Oh, no! I let myself in for nothing like that!" Nevertheless he was pleased, she thought; and she wanted very much to please him.

For Freda had indeed discovered what she wanted. Her life had slipped into pattern as neatly as a jigsaw, and it was incredible that she could ever have been uncertain. Not only did she know, but some age-old wisdom had shown her how to go about getting it. What she wanted was not a job, but she was willing to take a job to further her ends.

"But you could advise me! I mean, about how to get started."

"Go out and get yourself work," Amos said.

"Yes, but what kind?"

"Oh, wrapping bundles in a department store, waiting on tables. You could take a course in stenography and typing—or in bookkeeping—"

"Oh, but—but I want something with a future."

"You've got the future, not the job. Many's the girl who started off as a twenty-a-week typist and ended by running the business—whether the boss knew it or not. Hell, you women got it easy. Ninety-nine in a hundred of you are just horsing around till you get married: that makes it a dry track for the one who's serious!"

Freda's eyes dwelt moodily on the lawn.

Amos said: "Y' know Max Mann at the creamery—what his job is? He washes out cans, cases, sanitary piping; cleans up. You'd say there wasn't much future in that, I guess. Well, it's the same job I used to have. I don't say I've come far—running a bottling machine isn't so damn much. But you want to know where it'll get me? Into business." The spell of his talk with Swan still lingered. "Ten years from now I'll be running a dairy of my own. First I'll get to be plant manager here, and then—"

"I know! Daddy says you're good, and so does Mr. Thomas."

"Good? Hell, anybody can clean cases or run a bottling machine! They think I'm good because I know what to do when something goes wrong! I can fix machinery without yelling for Red; but so could you



if you didn't mind getting your hands dirty. I know where to pick up milk in a hurry—but so could anyone who wanted to drive around on his day off and talk to a few farmers. Ability, hell! It only takes time, work, and a little figuring, and you don't have to worry over what's going to happen; you can make what you want to happen!"

Freda sighed. "We don't all have such faith in ourselves."

"Yeah, that's a fact. Not one in a thousand's got gimp any more. They won't try to get anywhere unless it's in a gang. Like the drivers."

"Don't you approve of organizations?"

"How could I? I'll be on the management's side some day."

"But that's so personal! Isn't there a principle—"

"Sure, but I don't believe in it either. Me, I believe in the individual. A guy that's good don't need any help from a union; it's only a nuisance to him." He broke off. "Hello! We got company."

Ed Thomas said: "Is that you, Amos? I was looking for you at the creamery. Forgot it was your night off."

The bottler was on his feet. "Sunthin' you wanted?"

Ed glanced at Freda, but said after a moment: "Yes. About the creamery opening Tuesday. I've—uh—decided to make some changes when we move in. For one thing—I'm putting you in charge."

Freda caught her breath, and then there was silence. Finally she cried: "Amos Vliet, I bet you knew all the time! You must have."

Ed said: "He couldn't have. This is the first *anyone* knew of it."

Amos sighed softly. "In a way I did, just the same. I have for a long while. Thanks. . . . What about Larry?"

"That's up to you. It might be best if he went—but he can stay at his present salary if you say so."

"O.K."

"For me this is a gamble," the manager said. "You're pretty young. What are you—twenty? There'll be a lot of people expecting you to mess this up; but I believe you'll disappoint them—if you keep your head." "I'll keep my head."

"You'll get one-twenty-five a month. When I'm satisfied I've made no mistake—say in a year—you'll get what the other department heads do: have the choice of a house or an additional twenty-five. Don't forget, though, what happened to Larry when he didn't measure up. That's neither threat nor warning, but—"

"I understand."

"Well—congratulations—and good night."

Almost before he had entered the house, Freda leapt to her feet and

thrust both hands into those of the new department head. "Oh, Amos! It's wonderful! You said you'd be plant manager some day, and now you are. Already! Oh, I think it's—it's— Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

"You—you don't sound very glad, and you—hardly even thanked Ed!"

"After I've licked the job, it'll be time to cheer."

"Amos—" Excitement ran in her voice. "Amos—you know what I'm going to do? Enter business school, learn stenography and things—like you said. I'm going to make something of myself too."

He nodded, squeezing her trembling hands. "At-a-girl!"

Wharton Pettitt was saying everything expected of him: that Amos was far too young, too inexperienced; that he hadn't the background, the education, the native intelligence to handle the job; that Ed had gone off half-cocked again and would regret it.

Perched on the spare office desk, Ed Thomas listened without a smile though once he winked at Clint. It was one of those few occasions when he could be amused by the bookkeeper's violent prejudices; this time he was sure of his ground.

Indeed, things seemed to be shaping up very well. The morning's mail had brought him notice of an accepted bid for a new cafeteria opening up in town; the problem of barn and creamery heads might well be permanently solved; the drivers were satisfactorily quiescent; plans for night delivery and for the opening of the new creamery were complete. Shortly now, he could forget such minor worries and settle to the work he loved: figuring how to increase business by picking up a few local routes this summer.

Half wrapped in such thoughts, he missed hearing footsteps on the stairs and was startled when the door at his elbow opened, admitting a hesitant stranger, a little man in a derby and a brown suit baggy at the knees and sagging from the shoulders. His face was untidy with stubble, but he looked meek and a little frightened, his eyes darting nervously from one to another of the three men who were looking at him. He left the door open behind him.

"Thomas?"

"That's me." The manager got off the desk and tried to look dignified.

"Edward Darnley Thomas?"

"Yes."

The little man took a folded paper from his pocket and thrust it into

Ed's hand. "Subpoena," he said. "So long!" And he darted for the open door as though he expected pursuit and physical violence.

None of them moved as Ed slowly opened the paper. "Oh!" he said. It was then, for the first time, that he sensed how events had crept up on him, were crowding him faster than he wanted to go.

"What is it?" Petitt demanded.

Thomas's distress was apparent. He glanced at the bookkeeper, then back at the paper, then at the big calendar on the wall. "A week from Monday," he said, half to himself.

Petitt's hand was imperious, and Thomas gave him the paper. Then he turned on his heel, flung into the inner office, and slammed the partition door with a violence that threatened to crack the frosted glass.

The bookkeeper also read in silence, finishing with a grim but not wholly displeased expression on his dour face.

Clint asked, "What is it? Or is that none of my business?"

The bookkeeper shrugged. "The suit of Isaac Ledmuller versus Weyland Meadows Dairy is being tried a week from Monday."

## V

INDICATING the clock high on the gleaming wall, Ed Thomas addressed the creamery boys. "Late for work," he said sternly. His humor, as usual, was heavy-handed. "It's past ten, and you should have been bottling at eight! Nevertheless, late as it is, you'll be through today earlier than in many a year—for today you're in your new home."

Before him, in a white semicircle of faces, were the men, women, and children of the farm, a good two-thirds of Quinlan's dealers, many of the producers, several ice-cream dealers. There, too, were the invited guests: press, businessmen from town, other dairymen, a scattering of customers.

"You'll be working in a plant of the most modern design, using the finest equipment made. It should cut three hours from your bottling time."

The building was long and narrow. At its front, behind plate-glass doors, was an office lobby with a showcase; eventually there would be a girl to welcome visitors and take them to the comfortably furnished

mezzanine lounge from which, through a broad window, they might look down into the plant itself, a long high room whose soft, shadowless, windowless lighting gleamed on the white glazed tile of the walls, winked brightly from the stainless steel of equipment.

"We've come a long way. Some of you remember when we put out ten cases of milk and could hardly sell that. We had one route, and Bevis, yonder, delivered and collected it in three hours. How long ago was this? Eight years. Do you realize how far we've come in that time? Today we have seven routes and twenty-two dealers. Last Thursday we bottled an all-time high of 9,225 quarts."

How had it been done, he asked, and told them, dwelling on Melius, Wycoff, on the critical years of change and struggle. He gave due credit to all concerned. So the difficulties had been surmounted, the peak reached. At what cost? Worn-out machinery, crowded conditions, unreasonable hours. "Only the plant boys know what they've put up with this past winter, and they deserve high praise for their patience. The old creamery was at capacity. Staying in it meant no more growth, no more new routes, no more new dealers; it meant economy and scrimping to squeeze the last cent of profit from the last quart of capacity. And afterward: stagnation. Today's pay, today's hours, today's condition. No more. Trail's end for all of us.

"This"—he waved his hand—"is our answer: a modern, efficient plant which we can show with pride to customers and rivals alike; more than a building: a symbol, a direction post, a milestone."

He paused, then told them what the plant meant. Now they could take advantage of the increasing momentum they had built up, of the loyalty they had discovered in the community. It was their green light. "You think we've grown fast?" he said. "Well, watch us now. We'll grow not only locally but in Roxbury, in Bellows, in Fennel Park, in Moulton, in Polk, in Deckerstown, in the metropolitan area, throughout the state! And who knows?" He stopped, lowering his arms with a shrug and a smile. "Well, let it rest at that, lest our rivals take warning."

The room was silently thoughtful.

He asked: "What will this growth mean to you? For one thing, within a few months, a 10 per cent increase in your pay—"

They cheered at this, whistling and stamping.

"—and other increases later. But those of you who are willing to work can expect more, because you're in on the ground floor of a business that—today!—has a future. Growth will mean new jobs, and you men

here will fill them. I urge you to think, to *dream*, what this may mean in your own lives—and to work to make that dream come true!”

He finished to applause that sounded enthusiastic. As the clapping died, he said, “Let me introduce my boss and yours—the man who made this building possible—Gerald Melius.”

Jerry, large and hearty in white flannels, blue coat, and yellow tie, stepped to the front of the platform and said: “Don’t let Ed kid you. It wasn’t I who made this possible. The man with the vision and persistence to argue me into it was your manager himself.”

The applause was light, and Ed squirmed a bit.

“This’ll be no speech,” Melius went on. “Ed’s said what there is to say. But I want to repeat publicly two or three things I’ve said frequently to those of you I know personally.

“First: to thank you. No one man, no two or three are responsible for the changes here of the past eight years. Every last one of you has done his share, and your courage and cooperation have saved Wycoff, Thomas, and myself much money and worry. For that: my sincere thanks.”

Ed stirred uneasily. This was delicate ground.

“Second: Let me congratulate you. For in what you’ve done, you’ve materially helped yourselves. Only time can show you how much.

“Thirdly: Let me state in five words my attitude to the money the dairy’s now making: these profits belong to you.”

Ed developed a cold sweat. The labor situation was skittish enough without such booting around.

“Men in many another dairy and many another business would envy you today, both for your future prospects and for the fact that Weyland Meadows is so much nearer a cooperative or a mutual than a business.

“Let me explain. You know what an investment is? Well, I have six hundred thousand dollars invested here. Elsewhere—at 5 per cent, say—I’d be paid thirty thousand a year for it; more than Weyland Meadows has ever made. However, I don’t want 5 per cent, nor 3, nor 1—and never will. Because it was started as a hobby, not a business. It was fun. When it became too expensive fun, I had the choice of selling or of making my hobby self-supporting. All I wanted was to break even. And I won’t change my standards. Because few businesses have such disinterested investors, few could promise you so much. Think that over—and be patient.”

Oh, Lord! Ed thought.

“One thing more: this building cost money which might otherwise have gone to you. But remember: if it had, you would have sacrificed

for immediate gain all future profit. As it is, there's not one of you but can, in ten years, be making a salary that would seem fantastic today. Your management will always be working for such long-term gains, not short. So be patient—and have vision."

Ed sighed. Trust someone to hit them with a hammer. Still, it might have been worse. He plastered a smile on his face and stepped forward once more.

"It's fitting," he said, "that the new plant open under a new manager, a boy who's been one of you, and whose promotion is a symbol of what you all may hope for. His new responsibility has been richly earned, and, speaking for the management, I wish him luck and the success he deserves. Amos Vliet!"

Amos received an ovation that widened Ed's eyes and sent a thrill along his spine. He sensed that it was less for Amos than the fact that one of their own had been given his chance. It hinted at unguessed depths of feeling.

When they were ready to listen to him, Amos said: "Thanks for the hand. I'll save it up for the long, dry season ahead!" There was friendly laughter, derisive remarks from the front row. "See! Heckling already. That's all right. I'm no speech-maker and know it, but I only got one thing to say anyway: that the creamery is gonna work almighty hard toward this future Ed's been talking about. We got reason to believe in it today! And I got reason to believe in it in particular. Once you believe, all you gotta do is work. We'll do that." He paused. "Now, in the name of Weyland Meadows Dairy, I invite you all to watch the bottling of the new plant's first batch of milk. Boys: the show is ours. Pretend you know your jobs, and don't forget we have company. Max, open up that first pasteurizer. . . . Frenchy, get your bottle washer going. Come on, gang! Whaddaya say?"

He vaulted off the platform to scattered applause and a general rising of the audience. Machines roared to life. Empties began marching in a gleaming line from washer to bottler.

As the first quart emerged from the capper, Amos presented it to Jerry Melius. "With the compliments of the creamery!"

Flash bulbs flared as Jerry took it.

The second bottle went to Ed Thomas, others to the department heads. Ed saw that each representative of another company had a sample, and after that it was first come, first served. The crowd enjoyed itself.

Everything went smoothly. Ed, amidst well-wishers, producers,

dealers, friends, and rivals, had the time of his life showing off the plant. The crowd gradually thinned as other departments returned to work and visitors departed; but he was scarcely aware of time until Jerry Melius touched his shoulder and said: "It's noon. How about coming in town and having lunch with me?"

He excused himself to the handful still there. "Lunch? Why, you're having lunch with me. I've made reservations."

He had ordered the meal besides, and spent some time over it. He planned to broach Clint Matlock's suggestions while they ate, and hoped the combination of good food and dreams might take the edge off the bad news he must break afterward.

## VI

MICKEY PRATT was driving to town, his stomach leaden with reluctance, for he was on his way to the Agricultural School to arrange with a man named Morgan about a special course in dairying. Morgan and Ed Thomas had talked by telephone, and Mickey's task was no more than making out a class schedule; but he dreaded it as though it were some grim punishment.

It had all happened so quickly he did not understand it. Thomas, sending for him yesterday, had said: "Mickey, I want an honest answer to this: Do you like it here, and do you intend to stay?"

He had been baffled and uneasy, knowing the answer but hating to sound sentimental. "Like it? Stay? Yeah, I guess so. I guess I'll be here awhile. It's all right."

"Good. Now—uh—what does the place hold for you, Mick? What do you hope for? What job would you like to be doing in—say—ten years? For instance, have you ever hoped you might be running the barns some day?"

"Who—me? Hell, no! What'd I be doing doing that?"

A faint smile had touched Ed's lips. "Nevertheless, you may be," he said. And he had explained about a new system the farm was working out, something about producing their own milk instead of buying it. Mickey could see this meant other barns, other herds, more land, a lot more men to take care of it all; but the scheme was too vast to be real, and he was uncertain where he fitted in anyway. It had sounded as if he

were to be put in charge of a farm somewhere, sometime; but that was so crazy he had probably got it wrong.

No crazier, though, than his being on the way to the University in the farm pick-up. He who had never finished high school!

He wondered why, if the farm was sending someone to school, it had not picked Donny Ochs. Donny was always fooling around with records and charts. He would make a good boss too, if that was what they wanted; make the boys stand around in a way Mickey never could. He couldn't understand why they had passed Donny over.

The manager, without mentioning figures, had said the new job meant a raise. That would be good. It meant, at the least, that he could stay on at the farm as long as he liked. Or did it? What if he flopped? Be plenty easy to flop at a college where he had no right to be. And hell, if he did, that'd mean goodbye raise, and goodbye home too. Here he was, satisfied with things as they were, risking his job for something he didn't want!

Man, he'd got himself in a mess, for a fact.

He thought of ditching the pick-up and running out on it all, but this time did not really want to.

Would his new job, he wondered, make any difference to Ida? Ida had a down on barn boys, but a barn boss might be different.

The lady had had a large place in Mickey's recent thoughts, for somehow making the farm his home had gotten tangled up with the idea of having Mary to share it; and Ida was a complication.

Since the March blizzard, visions of Mary had haunted him, some of them vivid enough to drive him half crazy. Memory, in particular, of those dawn moments when he had awakened to find her beside him. Their other experience—their first one, thirty hours before—was murky and obscure; perhaps weariness had clouded his impressions then; perhaps a sneaking sense of failure. Or perhaps taking a girl by daylight, when you could see, was different. The excitement of it could return so sharply it was an ache; the blond circle of her hair on the pillow, the bold answer of her eyes to his, the quiver of body and breast beneath his hand, her unexpected strength. There had been nothing lacking that second time.

Almost, he wished it had been otherwise; for, once you had had a girl like that, you wanted her again and forever. Leaving her, he had never expected to return, but his memories were soon hinting that another adventure would be fun; later they had demanded it, had left him throbbing with their urgency, so that one night late in March, encountering her alone on one of the farm roads, he had spoken to her.



And that, too, was a vivid memory.

He had stammered with eagerness. "M-Mary—I have to see you. I got to. You said once— There's the barns— Could you—some night—to-night, maybe—"

But, even as he spoke, he had sensed that there was no answering spark. She had said remotely: "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Well—later then? Some other night? The end of the week?"

"Not ever. It was nice, but it's over, Mick."

"Over? You mean you won't meet me again—ever—anywhere?"

She had said, "Yes," and slipped away from his stupefied protests.

The barn boy did not understand. Once an ugly animal comparison had come to his mind, but he had dismissed it with fiery shame and the nasty sensation of having soiled himself. More likely, he thought, she was ashamed of what she had permitted; probably only marriage would satisfy her now.

So the idea of taking a wife had been born, and it fitted easily into his plan to settle down at Weyland Meadows. Besides, married to her, he could have her whenever and as often as he liked, and that was a rousing thought.

Still, he hesitated, partly from a natural reluctance and a sneaking fear that she might not want him even on those terms, partly because he was sure that, no matter what she said, Ida would not stand for it.

Now, perhaps, luck had provided him with a means of shutting her up—if he wanted to.

Still, when he reached the University and stopped at the curb, he had to argue with himself; and when he alighted it was not for any dreams of money, responsibility, home, or marriage, but simply because he had been ordered to see this Morgan, and could think of no way of dodging it.

The manager spent Monday in court, and on Tuesday morning was closeted with Wharton Pettit, who had hardly been able to wait.

He shrugged. "The court's holding up judgment, but Pete Thornburg doesn't think we've a chance."

The bookkeeper grunted without quite saying I-told-you-so.

"Returning the route won't be so bad, though, if there's no publicity and there's nothing in the morning papers. I've a hunch we're good enough advertisers so they'll play it down."

Pettit snorted. "Wait till judgment's announced!"

"Um—ye-es. Still, I think we may have been too apprehensive."

"Tell me what happened."

The manager was too willing. Listening to him, Pettitt frowned, for this was not the mood the man should have been in with the case going against him. He acted almost excited, and the bookkeeper, watching him, wondered.

Later in the week, Bill Bevis had a chat with Ed Thomas. He was always picking up scraps of information and had one now:

"Eastern Dairies are tryin' to buy out Keystone," he said.

Ed pursed thoughtful lips. "Could be. But I think they're early. Keystone's a long way from giving up the fight."

"Been on the down grade quite a while. I do' know."

Ed flashed him a glance. "Don't worry. Early or not, Eastern's not ahead of us; I've had an oar in there, and they know we're in the market. Sit down, Bill." He lounged back in his own chair, pointing the burly relief man to a seat with his pencil. "How are Eastern's routes coming along?"

Bill tittered. "Lousy! They're still running two, but neither's full. And, hell, most of their customers are ones the local boys wouldn't give no more credit to!"

Ed smiled. "How many did they plan on by the first of May?"

Bill's tight, high giggling grew. "Oh, Jesus! Remember what Steve wrote? 'Member all the advertising hooley they come in with?"

"They've dropped most of that."

"Yeah—and y' know what it means? That they figger they're throwin' good money after bad. I bet, if they can't buy Keystone, they'll pull out."

Ed shook his head. "They can afford to run routes in the red. They'll give it a longer trial than this."

"Depends if they think they can make it pay some day. Those guys are hardboiled. Hell, it costs money to haul milk forty miles before you even start delivering. And the drivers don't like the town; they told lots of people it's one of the toughest they gone into. They might back out, a' right."

"Speaking of drivers, what's the temper of our own now?"

"Oh, Barchi's tearing his hair. The rest are pretty quiet."

"No more organization meetings?"

"Nope. And no more dues. Nobody's dared ask for 'em!"

"Curious thing, how that Dunty business hit them."

"Um. But you were sorta lucky getting Roberts to take his route.

If you'd hired some sorehead, and he'd joined up quick, they'd 've been back hot by now."

"Lucky?" Ed sounded complacent. "I don't think so. Roberts wasn't the only man we considered, you know."

"I never met a pacifist before," Bill said. "Most guys are pretty ready for a fight, but this Roberts— Hell, if you say you're goina do somepin to the farm, he'll just ask: 'And then?' 'What you figure Thomas'll do?' 'Would *you* take it lying down?' Questions like that. It makes you think ahead, and it's cooled off the boys a lot."

Ed had a fat look on his face.

"Course it's crazy talk—it don't get us anywhere—but I guess you got the boys stymied as long as he's on your side. You better go outa your way to keep him there though—'cause I'm telling ya, Ed, back at the end of March it was nip and tuck whether you'd have serious trouble or not. And hell, you couldn't blame the boys. You kinda went outa your way to make 'em sore."

The complacency disappeared in irritation. "Sometimes, Bill, I think you don't understand my position any more than they do. Good Lord, if you'll just give me time— I've started Adrian on the houses. I'm even scouting for the salesman you've been hollering for. Uh—don't spread that: I haven't found him yet—"

"Give you some names: guys I heard about." Bill fished a notebook from his coverall, thumbed the pages, and provided names, addresses, and bits of data on three possibilities.

Ed grumbled his thanks, adding more distinctly: "Probably can't swing it right now anyway. This Ledmuller business might crimp our budget for the year. Have to wait and see."

"Um, but don't wait too long. If Barchi can't get action from the boys, or get Roberts and Ben lined up, he might try something like last summer. I heard he's been down in the creamery and over at the barns talking with the Ochs boys. Been at Larry's house too, I happen t' know."

Ed's tone changed. "Larry and Donny, uh?"

"He might have hold of something. After your putting Amos Vliet in charge of the new plant over Larry's head— And I heard Donny's griped too; I didn't get it straight why."

The manager considered, shrugged. "That won't get anywhere. Larry's a weak sister and won no friends by staying on here after Amos was upped. As for the barn boys, they haven't the guts to make trouble. Damn Barchi, though! Sometimes I'm almost willing to fire him on general principles as Pettitt would like me to! . . . Thanks for the tip,

Bill, but"—he shook a rueful head—"I wish I could ever decide which side you're on. When you come in with something like this—"

Bill grinned sheepishly. "Ah-h, I'm one of those damn fools that sees both sides and can't go whole hog for either. I don't string with Barchi when he starts draggin' in the farm. If we drivers make trouble—O.K.; but I don't need the moral support of a bunch of hunyocks and manure shovelers."

"Weren't you with the boys last summer?"

Bill's face became gargoylish as he fumbled for an answer. In the end, he mumbled weakly, "Guess a lot of us have grown up since then."

## VII

"HAL?" It was Bet's voice from upstairs. "Come up and see Davy. He's awful cute. He's been having his bottle. . . . No, Davy, you've had enough. Give it to mama. . . . His little fingers hold it so tight, Hal! . . . That's right, honey. There we are! . . . Gee, he looks so much like you. Why can't you see it? It's so plain!"

Hal's harsh voice from the stair foot cut in, bringing her to a dismayed halt. "Dinner? Oh, dear, Hal, is it time? Why, it's—it's— But you're so late!"

"Hell, I been working! It's Monday. It's a collection day. Chris! I been on my feet since three A. M., and it's after five now! I wanta get to bed—and the damn dinner not even started!"

Bet emerged into the upper hall, and her heels clattered on the stairs. "But even then, Hal, you should 'a' been home by two. It wasn't bad weather—" She paused before him, wrinkling her nose. "Guess you weren't working *all* the time. You stopped at a bar somewhere."

"So what? I still been out a hell of a while, I'm tired, and I want dinner! And it better not be burnt like yesterday's."

"Aw, Hal, I told you I was sorry! Baby was crying, and afterwards there wasn't anything else in the house."

"You think of nothin' but that damn brat."

He had never seen her in a temper, but for a split second he knew it was possible. He thought, If she gets fresh I'll knock her down.

But she slipped past him with lowered eyes and flushed face, and hurried to the kitchen. Having watched her that far, he turned and went

slowly up the stairs. He was tired enough, even if he had spent most of the afternoon in a pool hall.

His son was in the crib in the bedroom, flat on his back, arms and legs vaguely awave. Hal viewed him with distaste. Ugly damn thing—yet Bet tried to be flattering, saying it looked like him! She was wrong. The baby had her dark coloring, and its features were unformed, indefinite. Still, he thought acidly, she might have reason for dishing out that kind of bull! And since the blasted kid's arrival the house *had* gone to pot. Bet couldn't seem to leave it alone—always fooling with it, feeding it, changing it, talking to it. His own comfort no longer mattered. The whole place stunk of baby!

He sat on the bed, removed his shoes, and took off his tie. Taking wallet and key case from his hip pocket, he tried to put them down on the night stand; but it was cluttered with syringe, pan, bottle, safety pins. Shoving them aside, he uncovered something else—a man's wrist watch, not his own.

Lines appeared above the bridge of Hal's nose, and one hand went slowly to pick it up. Setting down wallet and keys, he turned it over and over in his fingers; but there were no identifying marks on either case or strap. He had seen it before, though.

He stared at it sixty seconds before the truth dawned.

It belonged to Vic Stewart.

Slow red anger grew to almost physical pain, cramping him so that, when he stood, he could not hold himself erect but walked to the door bent forward. He meant to call Bet, but his throat closed, choking him. Driven to fury by his inability to so much as swear, he turned and, with all his strength, hurled the watch toward the far corner of the room. It dented the wall and shattered.

The baby, frightened, began to cry, and downstairs there was a clatter of pans.

"Hal, what's the matter?"

He still could not answer. Crossing the room stiffly, he set his heel on the remains of the watch and crushed it against the floor.

Bet was hurrying up the stairs, her first look for the screaming child. "Why, Davy! Davy! What's happened? What's wrong? There, dear, there! What's the matter, baby?" She had him in her arms, gentling him, searching for the cause of his distress.

"No," he said bitterly, "I didn't slap it. I'm saving that."

"I heard something. I couldn't imagine—"

"You heard that!" He pointed.

Still soothing David, she came a step closer, staring.

"It's a watch. I smashed its stuffings—like I'll smash his!"

She was automatically quieting the child with hands and lips. As its sobbing stopped, she carried it to its crib, but not until she was sure it would lie peacefully did she turn and ask, "Whose?"

"Stewart's! Get it now?" His sarcasm was heavy. "Remember?"

She was frowning. "Where did you find it?"

"On the stand, of course. In nice, easy reach of the bed." No answer. He snarled, "What was he doing here? That's what I want to know."

"He came to read the meter—"

"Ho! A meter? In our bedroom? By God, that's a new one—"

"—and I called him to come up and see the baby. I wanted him to. He thought Davy was wonderful."

"Davy—or you?"

"Oh, Hal, don't be crazy!"

"At what peak of baby-loving did he take his watch off?"

She said levelly: "He took it off to dangle for Davy—to see if he'd reach for it. He did."

"And what was he doing that he forgot to put it back on?"

Bet shook her head. "I don't remember. That's what bothers me."

"I bet it does! And how did it get on that stand halfway across the room? What reason did he have for being over there?"

"I don't know, Hal. I don't remember."

"Yeah? . . . Well, I can guess."

"No." Her lips quivered. "What do you think I am, anyway?"

"I know damn well what you are!"

"Hal, it's not yet four weeks since I had Davy."

"So what? Maybe you stretched a point for him." He added weakly, "Anyhow, I've told him to keep away from here and from you—"

"Why? What do you care? You don't love me!"

"Damn right! But I support you. I pay the bills. I fork over for a kid I ain't even sure's mine—and by God, you'll stay faithful to me!"

The baby began to cry again, and Bet turned instinctively. Hal grabbed her shoulders, spinning her back, and she stumbled against the bed and onto it. "Let him yell! I haven't finished. I warn you: Don't let that guy in here again! Don't let him so much as speak to you, because, if you do—by God I'll take a strap to you!"

She met his look with an odd, sullen calm while Davy screamed. She said with scorn: "I guess you would! You'll probably find it easier than beating him. Nurse told me what luck you had doing that."

His flush deepened before it drained utterly away. His thin lips finally parted enough to let words escape. "I'll smash that lie down your throat. You're safe till I've wiped the ground with him, but after that— Well, I've warned you!"

Hal thought of himself as hardboiled. As a youngster he had been quick with his fists, but not too good, and had had to take the beatings which his thin-boned, light-muscle build made inevitable; and his surly temper earned him many. Gradually he had learned that fists were not his weapon, and after that he had expressed his hatred and rebellion with a bitter tongue and an arrogant, defiant aloofness. Nevertheless the illusion of his hardboiledness had never been dissipated, and now in his anger he had every intention of murdering Vic with his bare hands. If the man had been there he would certainly have tried desperately; but Vic was not, and by morning things looked different. He had had time to remember from their first encounter that Stewart had weight and reach if not height, and the advantage of coolness and a certain fighting knowledge. He had had time to consider the humiliation of setting out to thrash your wife's lover, only to be thrashed yourself.

So, briefly, he hesitated. Tuesday was his day off; but instead of finding Stewart and having it out he hung around the house, chain-smoking, unable to sit still, unable to endure his wife and child, unable, apparently, to leave. He was not happy, however. Already he had let Vic get away with knocking him down; now, tempted to let this slide too, he wondered if he might not be making excuses to cover the fact that he was afraid; and it was an unpleasant thought for a man who conceived of himself as a pretty hard specimen.

The procrastination did not last. Sometime during that restless day, he found out what he had to do.

He had to fight Vic, and he had to do it not in anger, but in cold determination. He had to whip him too. This last was important.

"Tomorrow," he said thinly, and now it was no postponement; it was a date.

A tough date to keep—facing fear for twenty-four hours—but Hal stood it well. With decision, his restlessness yielded to a quiet, sardonic mood and there was nothing wrong with his appetite at dinner. He went to bed and slept, and dawn found him delivering his route, his mind unchanged. To save his legs and strength, he took it easy all morning,

and with purpose ate early and lightly, timing his return to the farm to coincide with the end of the lunch hour there.

He unloaded by himself, though Bevis and Tom North came in just as he finished; but he found Sam Roberts' truck parked ahead of him outside the garage, and—as luck would have it—Vic Stewart just coming out to gas and oil it before putting it away.

Hal's lips tightened in a humorless grin. The moment was here.

It was not in him, after all, to go it completely cold. Leaning from his machine he called: "Stewart! Wash this crate tonight. It's dirty."

"You're crazy. We washed it yesterday—day before."

"Then it was a lousy job. Wash it again."

"O.K."

Hal scowled as the other swung into Sam's cab. He got down from his own, walked forward, and tried again. "What time is it?"

Vic started to raise his wrist, then shook his head. "About one-thirty, I guess. I ain't sure. I left my watch somewhere."

"Yeah," Hal said. "I found it—and smashed it to hell!"

Vic blinked. "Well, it wasn't such a hot watch—but why?"

"If you don't want it smashed, keep it out of my house. And if *you* don't want to be smashed, keep out yourself!"

"So that's where I left it?"

"Yeah."

Pause.

"So what?"

"So stay away—like I said."

The squabble hung fire.

Then Vic stepped down from the truck. "T' hell with you, Hal. I'll do as I please. She's your wife, but I'd be a louse to leave her alone with a damn sullen beast of a drunken fourflusher."

Hal reddened, but felt the lift of it. He said deliberately: "One more visit gets her a whipping. Remember that when you call."

Vic's hand shot out, gripped Hal's coverall, and pulled him close. "You yellow-bellied bastard! Lay one finger on that girl and I'll—"

He gave a vicious shove and turned his back. Recovering, Hal seized his shoulder, spun him around, and struck hard. The blow should have caught him off balance and sent him sprawling; but Vic slipped to one knee like a sack of flour, and it whipped past his head.

"I knew you'd try that. Brother, this'll be a pleasure I been hoping for!"

Someone was running toward them from the garage, yelling, "Hey! Hey! Hey! What goes on here?" It was Sam Roberts.



"None of your business," Hal said. "Keep outa this."

Vic stepped cautiously back. "It's a private scrap, Sam. You might stand by, see no one butts in."

"Wait now: take it easy. Fighting won't do you any good—"

"Maybe not, but it's been building up plenty long. I saved this cheap thug's life once—and it was a lousy mistake. But it won't be one now if I smash his head. Believe me, fella, it'll do us *both* good. Mind your business, and leave us alone."

"There must be other ways of settling it—"

"Shut up, and scram," Hal grated.

Roberts snapped a look from one to the other, sized up the situation, and yielded abruptly. "O.K., my friends—but this is no place for fighting. Maybe you're aching to be dragged apart after two blows, but if not, let's adjourn to some place more private. The sheds, say."

The fighters hesitated. Vic shrugged. Hal growled, "Hell!"

With a jerk of his head, Roberts led the way around the garage, up past the bull pen, into the quadrangle formed by the sheds and the horse barn. "O.K. Get to work. I'll referee it."

"Nuts! There'll be no holds barred."

"That goes for me," Vic agreed.

Roberts repeated: "I'll referee it. This fight'll stay decent or stop. Beat each other's brains out if you like, but if you want to be left to finish it, keep it clean."

Hal's stomach was a tight ball. His brief anger had had time to die, and he was afraid. He was stiff with fear, shivering with it; but determination was there too, and he had no thought of quitting. "The harder they fall," he told himself grimly.

The men circled each other, Hal reminding himself of his plan, hoping to get it fixed in his mind so as to follow it even after being hit. The circling became ridiculous.

"Scared?" Vic asked. "Or do you prefer dancing?"

Hal whitened, tucked his head down, and charged.

There was the crack of bare knuckles on flesh and bone. Pain exploded in Hal's face, and the next he knew he was on the ground, huddled over, holding his throbbing lips with his hand, knowing Stewart had taunted him into attacking and had measured him. He lowered his hand and saw there was blood on it. For a few seconds all his fight was gone.

"Had enough already?"

Hal made a disdainful sound, telling himself he had to get up. The

thought set him trembling uncontrollably; but slowly he rolled to his knees, and slowly he came to his feet, nursing his strength.

Vic was set, waiting, and aimed coolly for his battered lips as he waded in; but he had his head down, and the blow landed high. He stumbled and went to his knees, but was not too hurt to catch Vic's quick grimace of pain and the way he flexed his hand. He thought, That one hurt him more'n it did me, and he came off his knees fast.

For the third time Vic swung; but perhaps he hurried, perhaps hurting his hand had made him afraid of breaking it, or perhaps Hal had learned how to dodge; for the blow only grazed his scalp, and he was inside for the first time. Keeping his head down, he pumped one fist after the other into Vic's stomach as fast as he could manage; and he had the satisfaction of hearing the other grunt, feeling him back away. He drove forward and forward, and a furious joy grew in him as one fist after the other slammed home.

Vic, who had finished lunch less than an hour before, tried to hang on. He tried to cover. He tried to back away. When he doubled over to put his belly out of reach, Hal hooked three short uppercuts into his face. Finally he got one arm free, and drove Hal off with a body blow.

They faced each other at ten feet, both marked, both panting.

Sam Roberts stepped between. "How about it, boys?"

Hal growled in his throat. Vic gasped, "Get out of the way."

The three were no longer alone. They had evidently been seen moving toward the sheds, and Red Walsh, Happy Jacobs, Bevis, and Tom North were all there.

Hal licked his lips. Blood was sticky on them, and his mouth was dry; but he was no longer afraid. He had hurt Vic.

He gathered himself, and Vic must have seen it, for as he tore in, the other's sagging shoulders snapped erect, he took one step and struck from the waist with all the power of shoulder and body. It was right; it was timed to the second; it had a world of power, and it hit Hal's face with a dull, squashy thwack. Blood splattered as from a dropped tomato.

Hal was to remember the sting of tears even through the grinding pain of his broken nose. Coupled with the fact that he was breathing in sobbing gasps he got it into his head he was crying, and a red fury of shame swept him. He remembered that, and little more.

He came up so quickly that the startled garageman had no time to strike again and could only break ground and then break again as the driver pounded blindly in by feel and by instinct. Vic held, and the flurry became a wrestling match. Vic flung him off, and he tripped and

fell. Hal remembered that: falling, thinking he had been struck but not feeling it, and having the sudden conviction that Stewart could not hurt him any more. It was easy to get up.

He plunged in again, driving through a red mist for the blur that was his enemy. Once more Vic tried a sledge-hammer blow; but he was slow, and again Hal got inside where he could pound, pound, pound at Stewart's stomach. His blows were slower now, but driven fiercely, deliberately, with all his strength. The watchers could not count how often his flailing arms rose and fell.

"Goddam!" Happy Jacobs breathed, awed.

Infighting was not Vic's style, and he took it poorly. They could see his white face contort and wince, and Hal had the sweet memory of hearing in his very ear a grunted, "Ugh—oh, Jesus!"

At last Vic got away; and before Hal, groping in blind helplessness, could find him again he had set himself. This time he had a wide-open target. Roberts, seeing the cocked arm, made an instinctive move to stop it, but Hal was moving in and the blow fell. His driving progress was slowed as though by a breaker at the seashore, but Vic had lost the power to stop him; and he did not go down. An instant later he was close again, his tired arms hammering.

"By Jesus!" Red Walsh said.

Vic was definitely on the defensive now, was pushing Hal off instead of hitting him, was gasping as every third or fourth blow jolted the breath out of him, was beginning to turn green around the mouth though a trickle of blood from his lower lip was his only mark.

Red emitted a low, steady stream of profanity.

Bill Bevis crowed shrilly, "Sam, Sam, God-damn! Look at the man!"

Happy Jacobs, partisan, kept pleading: "Come on, Vic! Jeez, I didn't think the bastard had it in him. Quit pushing, Vic; hit him!"

Tom North said: "Sam, let's stop it. The guy's licked."

Sam Roberts nodded and began to edge forward.

Perhaps Vic heard, perhaps he saw, perhaps the sudden feel of the shed's walls behind his shoulders, and the realization that Hal had backed him into a corner, spurred him to action. Abruptly, he made his last bid, heaving the route man bodily away from him, setting one foot and both hands against the wood and launching himself forward in a vicious charge. He put all he had left into it, and for the fifth time the driver stretched his length on the ground.

And for the fifth time came up.

"Man! Man! Man!" Bevis was yelling.

Vic Stewart had shot his bolt. Seeing Roane back on his feet brought a look of helpless desperation to his face, and he folded both arms across his belly. Hal may have seen, though he never remembered it, or he may have hit for the face by instinct. What he did remember was a shattering jar that hurt clear to the shoulder, and the vivid picture of Vic on his knees, Vic staggering back to his feet, arms wide.

Relentlessly, he waded in.

Then Vic was flat on the ground, and Roberts, Bevis, North were between them. Roberts was shouting:

"That's enough, now. That's enough. You've licked him! He's through."

It was not enough. Even with victory singing in him, even with Vic lying there with two men working over him, it was not enough. Wild triumphant fury possessed him, and his terrible contempt for the man needed expression. This was Vic Stewart whom they had thought he could not lick, Vic Stewart whom Bet had taken for the better man. He had shown them! But he hadn't shown them what he thought of the guy.

Roberts was not expecting trouble; Hal flung his arms off easily enough. Tom North, kneeling, was expecting nothing either; Hal grasped his shoulder and pulled him over backward.

And there he was beside the man he hated.

He drew one breath and kicked Vic with all the passion left in him.

He heard the angry yell from more than one throat, saw Sam Roberts beside him. And that was the last he heard or saw for some time. Roberts's fist traveled six inches. It was a blow that scarcely seemed in the class with those Vic had been throwing, but Hal catapulted backward across ten feet of drive, spread-eagled himself against the shed wall, and slumped to the ground.

There were two seconds of utter silence while the rest stared. Then Bevis said: "Holy Mack! Holy Mack, what a poke! Ya see that, guys? That was Pacifist Sam Roberts who don't believe in force. Oh, Jesus, Sam, for a peaceful guy— Ho-oh, man!"

Roberts, nursing a knuckle, glowered at Bevis irritably, then produced a thin, rueful smile. "Some things get under my skin," he said.

## VIII

THE court returned its decision in the Ledmuller case on the 1st of May, ruling against the farm. The route was to be handed back on the 12th with a full accounting and a complicated adjustment of outstanding; but no damages were awarded, and no compensation.

That was all. The court considered it a border-line business deal, no more, and added no word of censure. Even the publicity which had been feared was confined to a two-paragraph story on a center page of the local paper.

Ed Thomas, after a show of exasperation over the work necessary to assemble an accounting of a route which had been scattered among several drivers, went around with a bland cat-in-the-cream look on his face.

## IX

AWAKE and not knowing quite why, Bet Roane listened for Davy's light breathing through the darkness, heard it, and was reassured. But there had been a sound of some sort. She was not a nervous sort, or she would never have lived at these isolated old greenhouses with Hal so much away; still, a sound in the night was disturbing.

It came again, a hard spattering on the screen of the window.

Briefly, before common sense reassured her, she was badly frightened.

As the summons came for the third time, she threw back the blanket, and went to the window without lighting a light. The night was dark, but she could see a dim figure on the drive below, and whispered through the open sash, "Who is it?"

The figure straightened. "It's me. Vic."

Her breath caught sharply. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

"Wrong? Nothing. I come over to talk to you."

"Why? Is everything all right—honest? Hal hasn't had trouble?"

"Hell, no! I gotta talk to you, that's all."

His tone reassured her, but with reassurance came a curious reluctance. "But, Vic—it's so late. It must be four o'clock."

"It's the on'y time I could come. Look: don't light a light. Jus' slip somepin on and come down. Hell—y're not afraid of me, are ya?"

Afraid—when she had been alone with him here numberless times at

all hours? Why should she hate to let him in tonight? Perhaps it was the knowledge that he and Hal had fought over her, that things could never again be as they had been. Vic would have changed—how, she did not know; but it was no time to learn.

He said: "I waited purposely till Hal had loaded and gone. And I hadda come at night, or someone might 've seen. Lemme in. We gotta talk, Bet. We *gotta*! Nobody'll know—unless they hear us arguing here like this."

"No, Vic."

Silence. Then he said: "We're going to, if I have to break in and come up there. How about it?"

She whispered a miserable, "Oh dear!" not knowing what to do. Finally she drew on a wrapper and fumbled cautiously to the stairs. She would talk to him on the stoop, she told herself. But as she opened the front door he pushed in.

"Vic! You mustn't—"

"Sh-h! The night's still, and sound carries."

"What do you want?" In the darkness his hand touched her breast, slid to her shoulder. "Vic—don't! I'm not dressed."

She pushed at his body sharply, heard him suck his breath, felt his hand jerk away.

"Sorry. I—I didn't mean to frighten you." His voice was unsteady, weakish. "Is there a cigarette around?"

"You get out of here!"

"Please, Bet! I didn't mean what you thought. Besides, I've—I've got to sit down a minute. I'm—Get me that cigarette, huh?"

She heard him lower himself onto the sofa gingerly, and her fright dissipated. She moved to the table where there had been a pack of Camels.

"Here. Wait—I've a match."

When it flamed in the darkness, she saw him steadying the cigarette with one hand, holding his other arm tightly across his stomach. In the ruddy light his mouth sagged a little at the corners.

"You—you look all right—compared to Hal."

"I've a bruise across the middle of me—right where you pushed—that's as sore as all hell."

"Aw, I'm sorry! I hope it's not bad."

"Nah. They had a doctor for me, though."

"For Hal too. His nose was broken, and his mouth and face all cut. I—I wish you hadn't fought. You're both so hurt—"

"His showed, but I got the worst of it. It sounds like crabbing, but I

hurt my hand right at the start—you can feel: it's still swollen—and I couldn't really hit with it again. But give him credit: he knew the fight he had to make—and made it. Yeah, and came off the ground to lick me. But what the hell! I guess he's told you about it. Plenty!"

"No. He just growls when I ask what happened. He's been in one of his terrible surly tempers. I don't know why."

"Yeah? I figured he'd be boasting. Maybe it's what happened after. He kicked me! And Sam Roberts knocked him cold for it."

"Oh!" And then again, "Oh!"

"Maybe it soured his fun." His cigarette glowed, and he sighed. "Feeling better! You still standing. Look. C'mere and sit down. I got something to say. Didn't you want to smoke? Here: I got the pack. Where are the matches? . . . There. Now sit down."

She seemed unable to avoid it and sat in the far corner of the sofa, drawing her feet up because the floor was chill.

"Y' know I'm glad Hal and I had that scrap. It cleared up plenty I been thinking and feeling. Hal and I never got on. I didn't like that damn superior puss of his. I didn't like his suspicions or his drinking or his running out on you the night Davy was born. There's a hell of a lot I didn't like. But I guess fighting him showed me what was really wrong. You know what he told me? Know why I'm sneaking around in the dark like a damned thief? He said if he ever found I'd been over here again"—his voice shook—"he'd take a whip to you. And the damn bruiser would!"

"Yes. He will—if he finds out."

Something vicious and half intelligible grated deep in Vic's throat. "Bet, you can't go on living with the blasted brute! I won't let you. Right off I knew why I hated him, see? I love you! And that's why I won't leave you with him any longer. We're going away together—you and Davy and me."

"No. I'm sorry, Vic." Her coolness held no regret.

Sounding puzzled and frightened, he cried: "But you can't want to stay on with him! Not with a guy who might take a whip to you—the blasted— Not when I've said I loved you—"

"Stop it, Vic! I guess I should be sort of flattered, but I'm only sorry. I— Uh-uh!"

"But *why*? How can a girl stand to be treated like a—a slave?"

Bet fumbled for a pretense. To her mind's ear, the truth sounded stilted and unnatural; and she shrank from it. Still, it was impossible to answer Vic's earnestness with anything less.

She flushed hotly, "I guess I'm in love with him, Vic."

"*Love* with him!"

"Sh-h! You'll wake the baby."

He whispered furiously: "For God's sake, what do you see in him? Is there one thing about him a woman could love? The way he acts— Does he ever speak a civil word?"

"Not often—but that's just his way."

"Does he ever put more than half a dozen together at a time?"

She said wryly: "Yes. When he's irritated!"

"And that surly, snooty temper!"

"He can be nasty, yes. But— Oh, I just love him, Vic!" The word came easier now. "You can't take it apart. His temper, all the rest, don't count. Down underneath— Well, he's complicated, and yet it's the queerest thing. I seemed to know all about him right from the first, and I seemed to know what was going to happen. I couldn't have stopped it if I'd wanted." She said deliberately: "I was his from the very start. I guess you and the farm know that by now. I don't care. I'm proud, almost."

Vic brushed it aside impatiently. "Aw, that! As though it mattered! A girl gets carried away. Anyone does. Sure, Hal's handsome, and you'd go for that high-handed stuff for a while. It's different. But, damn it! how can you stand being married to him?—putting up with that same tripe day after day! Hell, a girl ought to have pride enough to slap him down."

"I haven't any. Not with Hal."

"But if he beats you?"

"It wouldn't matter."

"Oh, fer—" He burst out angrily: "I don't get it! I don't get *you*! How can you live with a guy, submit to everything horrible he can think up, when you know he don't even love you?"

That made her wince.

"Why would you want to? Whaddaya see in him that nobody else does?"

"Oh—a little boy, who's never had much fun—insisting he's had the best life in all the world."

"A little— For God's sake! You don't mean *Hal*?"

"Yes. That's what he's like, Vic. Ever since he was little, people have disliked him. He hardly ever talks about himself, but there was his father—and an uncle and aunt. They didn't like or—or want him. Well, what would you do? Play tough, too, I guess: pretend you were better than they—better than anyone—so you could stand it? Don't you see? He



had to be surly and sullen to keep from being hurt. It—got to be part of him, and nobody's ever had a *chance* to like him since."

"I heard girls always liked him well enough."

"I guess a lot of us went for his looks and his—brutality—"

"Doesn't that make any difference either?"

"Not much. Because ever since we—we've been man and wife, he hasn't gone with any others—and he won't as long as we are. You'd be surprised about Hal; he's got a very strict code about some things."

"But what can you hope for with him? What—"

"Lots. Nothing that makes sense, but— Oh, I can't say it. There's only one thing I hope for really, I guess."

The silence dragged out. Vic muttered, "Where's the damn ashtray?" She heard the faint skreeking of the coal. "Yours?" She found it in the dark. Then he stood up. "I guess, if you feel like that, there's no use my saying much more."

"No. I'm sorry, Vic." And suddenly she was—terribly!

Poor Vic had paid her his highest compliment; but, because what he proposed had seemed impossible to the point of ridiculousness, she had received it callously, not even trying to spare his feelings. He was nice, and in her swift pity she almost wished it might have been otherwise. She fumbled for words that would help, but there were none.

This was goodbye. They might meet again, smile, say Hello, but the comfortable friendship which had been theirs was gone forever. There should have been something for one or the other to say or do, but neither could find it.

Vic sighed. "Well, I'll be moving. Did I have a hat?"

"I don't think so."

"Yeah. Well, I'll be off then. I—I guess I shouldn't 've come."

There were prosaic good nights, and from the stoop Bet could only repeat: "I'm sorry, Vic! Honest. You don't know how much."

## X

SUNDAY was too beautiful to waste indoors, and the Goetzes had puttered outside all afternoon. Now, with the sun on the horizon, Ben was watering the lawn, Sonia transplanting in the flower beds below the porch. Ed Thomas, coming by, paused to say Hello and stayed to chat idly.

"Oh, I'm fine," he said, answering Sonia's question. "So are the Ellises. Spring agrees with Swan and the boys."

"And Freda?"

"Freda, thanks to you, is a new woman." Ed's smile was crooked.

"Thanks to me?"

"A certain New Year's party which I unfortunately missed."

"Oh, Lord—that blot on the Goetz escutcheon!"

Ed smiled. "At least it did wonders for one person. Freda has got her balance back. Did you know she's going to business school? learning stenography and typing? Bookkeeping too, I think."

"Gracious, no! Wharton Pettitt better look to his job!"

Ed chuckled.

She said: "Ben, you're drowning that spot. Do move the hose."

"Swan's not quite in sympathy," Ed went on. "Myself, I think it's a good thing. The girl's had enough housework since her mother died. It's time she had some fun—if business school is that! Still, you know Swan; I think he's a little apprehensive. But Freda's in earnest. She's done some growing up, Sonia. It's been like a drifting ship suddenly acquiring a hand at the helm. She's straightened out, got on her course; there's purpose in every line of her. Yes, I think it's a good thing."

"I've heard she has more than one new interest. Young Vliet?"

"Oh, that! That's not serious. Amos has taken her out a time or so, but he's not more than casually interested."

"Then I hope she's not. Poor girl! She's had her share of trouble, and is ripe to adore the first boy to smile at her."

Ben said, "I hear Amos is getting on good with his new job?"

Ed nodded. "Fine. Things have moved more smoothly in some ways than they did under Steve Ochs. At least the plant bookkeeping has taken a turn for the better."

"I hope," Sonia muttered, "he hasn't Steve's habits with milk." When the manager had moved on she said with thoughtful surprise, "You know, Ben, Amos may have been a very good choice after all." She pulled on stained gardening gloves slowly.

"The gang think plenty of him." Dragging his hose, Ben sought a new part of the lawn. "They rode him some, but he gave as good as he got."

"Of course he had one advantage: they all knew it wasn't Larry who had kept the plant running all winter. Still, it would have been so easy for his head to swell. He's so young. Frankly, I thought Ed was foolish. I'm not at all sure now that the precedent isn't bad. Promotion from the

ranks may be all right some places, but with the caliber men we have here—I'm not sure it's a wise thing."

"Yeah, it's good," Ben said. "Talk with the boys: you'll be surprised the difference a little incentive makes."

Sonia cried, "Oh, Clint! Yoohoo—Clint!"

Young Matlock waved from the Heims' back porch.

"Come over and say Hello—why not?"

Ben said stubbornly: "It's all right, promotion. I hope what they say about Mickey Pratt is true, too; I meant to ask Ed."

"Hello," Clint said. "How are the Goetzes? Long time et cetera."

The greetings dragged out, but Ben's mind clung to its thought:

"Hey! Why're we sending Pratt to school, Clint?"

"I don't know—officially. Maybe to learn more about dairying!"

"They're sure grooming him for something!"

"Whatever it is, I'm afraid it's given the Ochs boys another grudge. Which Lew Barchi is making the most of."

"Aw, Lew's gone crazy," Ben said. "Remember how, after last summer, he was never going to trust outside help again? . . . It won't work, though. Ed's made a new pair of soreheads, but he's kicked morale high enough to offset it. And, besides, there's this Roberts—"

Sonia said: "Oh, he's a grand person, Clint! He doesn't believe in unions or force. As long as he's here, we're safe."

Clint said: "The man interests me. I'd like to know him better."

Their talk dribbled aimlessly. Ben mentioned the gaudy sunset, and the others ambled into the open to look. Clint said it had been a wonderful day; Ben, that the whole spring had been beautiful; Sonia asked why they had not made more use of it.

"We should have had a picnic. We used to have one every few weeks. Ben, could we get one up, d'you think? We could ask the Ellises—they used to love them—and the Norths and the Heims . . . How are the Heims, by the way, Clint?"

"The Heims are—well, the Heims!"

"That's a doubtful statement," Ben grinned.

"Isn't it! I was going to say 'all right'; but that's not so, according to Ida. She says Mary's sick. Mary says she's not. She's taken to lying abed mornings, refusing to come to breakfast, says she's in rebellion against maternal discipline; but Ida wants to send for the doctor. *I* say she's bored, poor girl!"

"A picnic's certainly in the cards," Sonia said. "Ben, we'll have to see what we can do."

Ben's look was that with which most men greet news of a picnic; but just then a car slowed to a halt in front of the house, and Sam Roberts stepped down.

"Hi there, Goerzes. Hello, Matlock—glad to see you."

After general greetings, Ben asked, "How much of your route you losing to Ledmuller, Sam?"

Sam's eyes flicked deliberately at Clint, who had the sudden feeling that he was *de trop*, that Sam had something more serious on his mind than a social call. "Oh—half."

"For once I'm lucky. I lose only three or four. As I understand it, we stop delivery and then resolicit?"

Sonia caught Sam's glance this time. "Oh, don't mind Clint! His right hand works in the office; but his left's on the pulse of the farm, and neither knows what the other does."

Embarrassed, Clint said, "I'll run along."

But Sam said: "No, no. I might say, anyway, 'If this be treason—'" And then, answering Ben: "No, we don't exactly 'resolicit.' Isaac may get an injunction to prevent that. What we do is discontinue without notice after Saturday morning's delivery, letting Ledmuller take over Sunday morning the 11th. But Bevis is covering the route that morning too—after Ledmuller—leaving notices to the effect that the court has ordered the return of the route, and that they are therefore receiving Ledmuller Dairy milk. And then, in another paragraph: 'Weyland Meadows still remains ready to serve you in any way, at any time.'"

"Subtle, huh?" Clint said.

"Perhaps. But we set that right by 'collecting' the route Monday. To present our 'final bill,' of course. If we get the chance, we're to explain, making it clear that while the court's order is binding on us, it isn't on the customer; she can take from any dairy she chooses, including ours. All she has to do is say so and leave Ledmuller a discontinue notice."

There was a little silence. Sonia said doubtfully:

"I suppose we've given those customers better milk and service than they ever had from Isaac. If they want to go on taking from us, why shouldn't they?"

"Because," Clint said, "they've had the chance to know and like us only because, originally, we stole the route."

"But if the customer *wants* to come back—"

"What Matlock and I object to," Sam said, "is Ed's obvious plan to *get* them back. He's complying with the letter, not the spirit, of the law." Clint's frankness seemed to have loosened his tongue. "Not that I blame

Ed. This is exactly what executives are paid top money to sit in their offices and think up."

Sonia said: "I'm not defending it, but—there's poetic justice in Isaac's getting caught short. He's no prize himself."

"So that makes everything all right?"

Sam's voice shook, and Clint realized suddenly that the man was savagely, silently angry.

But Sonia said, "Business has always been catch-as-catch-can—"

"And if everyone fights dirty that makes all fair? Glory, how many times I've heard doubtful deals defended with the two words, 'That's business!' Business, clay Buddha that it is, can do no wrong!"

A lowing from the cow barns was distinctly audible in the dead quiet of the evening. Clint looked up at the tiny clouds, motionless and pink with afterglow against the baby blue of the sky. All the world outside themselves seemed awed to silence.

"Business?" he repeated.

"Management," Sam said. "The infinitesimal tail that wags the dog. The men who make policy, and get so royally paid for it—at their own direction. Of course, the clever have always found ways to make money without working for it—'living by their wits,' we used to call it; but you wouldn't mention a businessman in the same breath, naturally, though his racket's the most lucrative of the lot."

The bitterness shook them all to momentary silence. Then Sonia accepted the challenge.

"It's no good calling names, Sam. You're bitter, and I don't know why; but, believe me, brain work deserves more reward than mere muscular skill. Don't forget the investment your executive puts into education and experience; he has a right to a return on that—"

"Six per cent? Or six hundred? Or six thousand?"

"And we always pay higher for a commodity that's rare."

"And sometimes for gaudy trinkets of no intrinsic value. Through lack of judgment. And rarities don't usually set their own value."

"But you have to offer more for your top jobs. Otherwise what incentive has the ordinary workingman?"

"Sure you do. There are the incentives of position, power, honor; above all, security. But offer money too. Just keep it in reasonable proportion. That's all I'm talking about. I only want these boys cut down to size."

"What size, exactly?" Ben asked, shifting his hose.

"Well—take your hands," Sam said. "Even if your right is cleverer, stronger, more knowing than your left, do you give it more credit in lift-

ing a stone? No. It's a two-handed job; you don't think of 'my superior right which is so much smarter, and my inferior left which is only good for helping'; you think of 'my hands'!"

"Write a letter," Sonia said, "and see what happens!"

"So you keep your right wrapped in cotton? give it an extra spot of Jergens lotion every night as reward? No. You still consider it one of 'your hands' and treat the two alike."

Clint put in: "Maybe this is what he's trying to say: You want a gear to fit a machine. Some man with education and intelligence designs it; another with training and manual skill takes the blueprint and makes the gear. One works with pencil and paper, the other with hard metal; one with his head, the other with his hands. Neither can do the other's job, neither produce the finished gear alone. So why should one rate higher than the other? And why should some executive who merely says, 'Draw it—make it!' and can probably do neither himself, rate more than both together?"

"He might not, if that were all he did." Sonia hesitated, trying to focus what she wanted to say, and in the gathering dusk Ben slapped a mosquito. "What he's really being paid for is building America. He's the man who had the vision of great factories and production lines; he's created jobs for millions, brought them necessities and luxuries at incredible savings, given them a standard of living unparalleled elsewhere. He's created this country. He's changed the world."

"Alone," Sam asked, "or with a little skilled and intelligent help from the masses? And while you're speaking of vision, don't forget the vision necessary to make millions of dollars while grudging a penny to those men whose weariness made his products and profits possible; the vision to fight those men at every turn, angering them till his own throat is in danger—just about an all-time record for vision! . . . What's this man's actual job? He brings together inventors, researchers, designers with mechanics, salesmen, laborers. Isn't that essentially it? He picks the brains of the scientific men in the one group and uses the other to carry out the ideas he gets. His own contribution is selection and organization: an important role, yes, but not the dominant one. Yet he holds the reins and uses his position as coordinator to exploit, to mulct both other groups. He's a normal part of the corporate body, but he's cancerous, running wild."

"Nonsense," Sonia said firmly. "Remember the tact and patience necessary in any coordinating role. Remember the rare judgment and cold courage necessary for exploitation, as you call it. Think of his responsi-

bility. How many of those poor 'exploited' could or would accept such a burden—with their future and that of thousands riding on their judgment? That's worth something, Sam. It's worth a lot. And it's still but one aspect of a many-sided job. Add it all up! Your executive deserves every cent he gets."

"Not if he quits after an eight-hour day. Time won't stretch; one man's minute may be more valuable than another's, but there's an ultimate limit to any minute's value, no matter whose. Beyond that—*reductio ad absurdum*."

"And by what right does he take this responsibility you claim for him? Why should the fate of a multitude depend on the judgment or the whim of one man? That's not democracy. Take Gerald Melius. I don't know him and have nothing against him personally; but I hate the idea that he could quit the milk business if he wanted to, boot us all out without consulting a soul. No man—tenpenny owner of an obscure milk business or the head of a nation—should have such power over other people, actual or potential. That's dictatorship."

The silence of the evening flowed back, and after a moment Sam said: "I'm sorry. I warned you once before not to get me started."

Sonia said unsteadily: "But, Sam, that's our system. What would you have here? Socialism? Communism?"

"A little more democracy in capitalism, that's all."

"But how, Sam?"

"Let the side of business claiming the brains solve that," he said evasively. "Now let's get off this. It only makes me very unpleasant."

Ben took the talk to less volcanic ground. But Clint stayed out of it, his thoughts busy. It seemed to him that there were storms ahead. Sam Roberts had been blowing off steam, and no doubt his feeling about the Ledmuller affair had been considerably relieved. Still, there were dangerous depths to his convictions, whether they were right or wrong; and Ed Thomas, perhaps not as safe as he conceived himself, might do well to watch his step.

## XI

DAVY slept silently, spread-eagled in his crib, his head on one side and his profile clear against the sheet, looking so like Hal that Bet's heart turned over. He was a wonderful sleeper; neither the shaded bedside lamp nor her undressing had disturbed him.

She listened again to the sound of feet in the living room downstairs. Up and down, back and forth, restlessly, endlessly.

At least, she thought, decision was costing him something.

Her understanding of Hal had failed miserably since his fight with Vic. She had expected him to be grimly triumphant, loud with contempt of his victim and of her; instead he had been only sullen and irritable, and she could not guess why. Tonight, however, her lost instinct seemed to have returned, and though no change in attitude, mood, or expression had been visible, though he had been neither more nor less ugly today, she was sure she knew what he was debating down there. If she were right, their life had reached its turning point at last.

How could she know?

Because a climax was due. Because this was Monday again, and tomorrow his day off. Because he was as he was where girls were concerned. Because her heart was instinctively sure.

If he left the house tonight—

And she had no plan for stopping him.

Her fingers were cramped and stiff, so strong was their grip on the rail of the crib. Abruptly aware of it, she loosened them, turned, and crossed to the bed. No use just standing there, thinking, listening.

She sat on the bed's edge, folded hands in her lap, eyes unfocused but ears intent. Twice the restless feet downstairs halted at the front of the house, bringing tenseness to her waiting body; but both times the pacing was resumed. She sat listening an interminable time and then, for no reason, decided to get into bed. She rose, discarded her dressing gown. Almost as though it were a signal, the pacing feet changed direction, entered the dining room, and began a slow, deliberate ascent of the stairs.

Bet stood rooted.

He had nothing to say to her, which was not unusual; and, as he shucked out of his coverall and began unfastening his shirt, a new hope sparked unbidden to life. But then he got a clean one from the bureau drawer, and the spark was stifled.

Trembling uncontrollably now that she knew, Bet sank to the edge of the bed. "Hal, why— Where you going?"

"Out."

"But—but so late— Why? Where?"

His jaw tightened. "Who cares?"

"Hal, is it— You're going to see a girl, aren't you? . . . Like—you used to?"



No answer.

"Is that it, Hal? Please tell me!"

"What's it to you?" His superior aloofness was like a sheathing of frost; its chill was almost sensible.

So she had been right.

But . . . *how* right? Hal had been terribly patient these past weeks. Perhaps he could merely stand it no longer, being what he was.

She drew breath. "You don't have to go out, Hal—not for that. I'm—all right now." What difference did a few days make? She felt fine. "Honest I am! Don't go out. Please!"

His eyes told her nothing, but his fingers buttoned the shirt methodically; and she had her answer. So it went deeper than woman-prowling. She had known, of course, yet certainty brought its sickening reaction. She could think of nothing to do or say.

Words came finally of their own accord: "I—I hope I'm no fool, Hal. I— You've a code, sort of. While we were living together, there was no one else. So I—I know what you mean by—going out tonight. You're through with me, aren't you? For good."

"You could call it that."

"Why?"—dully. "What have I done?"

There was no answer.

"Is it the baby? Has Davy made any difference?"

"Why should he?"

She shook her head. In spite of Hal's suspicions, the child had made no apparent difference before its arrival. Why should it now?

"What have I done, then?"

"You wouldn't understand." He adjusted his tie above his collar clip. In two minutes he would be on his way; and once gone—

She shuddered. She had no plan; her mind was a hot, arid blank. A few dull words trickled slowly, hopelessly, from stiff lips:

"Is it Vic? What you thought about him was never true. You know that now, don't you?"

"Like hell!" This was so vicious and cold it surprised her.

"You're jealous, Hal! Oh, but you don't have to be—"

"I said before: I don't like my things messed with. My clothes, my tools—my wife. If they are, I don't want 'em. Jealous, *hell!*"

"Vic's never messed with me—"

"You think I'm a damn fool?"

"But he's never once—"

*"Shut up! What do I care, anyway?"*

He had made a mess of combing his hair. Now his hands, holding the implements, rested on the dresser top, white-knuckled with passion.

Bet insisted: "He never did. Even if he had, you—whipped him, didn't you? proved yourself the better man? D'you think, even if I'd cared for him—and I never did—"

Her words trailed off. He had not spoken, looked at her, or made a movement save to go on with his hair-combing deliberately, carefully; yet she sensed it had been the wrong thing to say.

Silence lengthened. Hal found his suit coat and vest, got into them, paused for a last glance in the mirror.

He'd be back, she thought desperately. Obviously, for he was taking nothing with him. He would go on living here, and they could hardly share the same house without eventually— Hadn't she seduced him once, after he had ignored her for weeks?

He slipped past her, as though fearing she might throw herself in his way; but numbness possessed her, through which loss and despair rose diluted, demanding no outlet, even in tears. This was defeat, and she had no resources to counter it.

He had reached the door before she spoke. Again words rose from some wellspring deep within her so that she was almost surprised to hear them.

*"Hal, if you're going, there's something you oughta know—"*

He paused.

*"Vic was here Saturday night after you'd gone."*

They were perhaps the only words which could have held him. Even in that dimmed, artificial light, she saw him color swiftly, then pale. She watched with a detached, impersonal fascination as his rage mounted. She knew what must happen, but was oddly unconcerned.

His voice was strained. "By God! And two minutes ago you claimed he'd never touched you!"

*"He didn't—but he was over here."*

It was not as she had expected; she had envisioned the speed and violence of pure fury, but Hal reentered the room slowly, almost reluctantly. He made miles of the few feet between door and bed.

"Why tell me?" He spoke with great effort. "You didn't have to. Why boast of your disobedience, your—adult'ry?"

"It wasn't that! . . . As for why, I thought, since we were through anyway, it should be clean. I thought you'd go away—and stay away maybe, if you knew. With a clearer conscience!"

A muscle at the corner of his jaw always betrayed the depth of his temper. "I promised you something if he ever came back. Guess you thought I was kidding."

"No. I knew you weren't, Hal."

Still he made no move. He seemed to be waiting, but it never occurred to her to plead, that there was any hope in pleading. A feeling of unreality persisted even when, so slowly that every movement seemed in response to individual instruction from the brain, he removed his coat and vest, tossed them across the pillow, unbuckled his belt, and pulled it slowly from the loops. She noticed that he was trembling, and thought it odd.

He doubled the belt to shorten it, then held it stiffly at his side, away from his leg. Her heart thudded now with the awakening realization of what she had precipitated, with the first twinges of panic terror. He held the position so long that she wanted to scream.

Then his arm rose, and she cowered instinctively; but the blow did not fall. Instead he flung the belt from him as, a fortnight before, he had flung Vic's watch, with all the violence his anger could summon.

"God damn you to hell!" he said. "What did you tell me for? Are you trying to make what's left of my life a hell of your own sweet particular brand? You bitch. You slut."

"Don't, Hal." Tears stung her eyes at last.

Davy, awakened, was crying too.

"Don't!" he mimicked.

"Oh, get out!" she cried. "As though I cared any more. Go on. Have fun with your—your—"

"Goddam right! Why shouldn't I? You had yours—"

She shrieked, "That's a lie!"

"Anyway, you love him."

She pounded her fist on the bed, her tear-stained face upturned to his. "I never, never, never! He's been over here, but he's never touched me. Never tried to. Aw, Hal, don't be crazy. I never lied to you—never once, right from the start. I tell you, he didn't!"

Her furious earnestness blunted his ire, stirred uncertainty in his mind. He growled: "O.K., O.K., so he didn't. But you been wanting him to. You been waiting for him to. You're in love with him, goddam it."

Her rage startled him. "You can't say that!"

Her flushed face darkened, her eyes flamed. Before he could guess what she intended, she had leapt to her feet and was pounding at him wildly, blindly, with doubled fists.

"You can't say that! You can call me names, you can even say Vic did things to me, but you can't say that!"

Her blows rained on his chest and face. One struck his still swollen nose, and he swore sharply in pain. After a moment he captured her wrists and, twisting them cruelly, brought her to her knees in sobbing submission.

"You hurt me," he said. "You lousy little—"

"You can't say that," she mumbled. "You mustn't. It isn't true."

He glowered at her uneasily, his grip relaxing.

"Aw, Hal! How could you think it, even? Ever since I met you, ever since that first day, there's never been anyone but you. You must 've known. How could you help it? I told you often enough."

"How?" he repeated. "Jesus Christ, what was there to make me think you might! Certainly nothing in the way we got married! Girls mess around plenty without being in love. Yeah, and they use the word so easy it don't mean nothing. Anyway, why the hell should you? No woman could love me—a guy who licks a man and then kicks him in the slats when he's flat on the ground—a guy who pastes his bride in the puss on her wedding night! Love me, hell! A woman 'd be crazy to, when there's a decent guy like Vic Stewart waiting for her."

"Then I guess I'm crazy, Hal." She sounded very tired, and her movements were slow and beaten as she dragged herself back to the edge of the bed. "I love you, Hal; I always have, only I don't know how to prove it any more than I have. What difference does it make anyway? Whether I love you or not, you don't love me. If you did, I guess you'd have killed me a few minutes ago."

He said fiercely: "You got me all crossed up. I don't know what to think. If it's any blasted satisfaction: I wanted to take your hide off from neck to knees—and couldn't, God damn it, *couldn't!*"

Her red, brimming eyes were bewildered. "But, Hal— But, Hal, I—I don't understand. You don't— You can't— You've never— Do you, Hal? Do you?"

The look he gave her was furious—and helpless—and she sobbed suddenly.

"You crazy fool, Hal! You great big foolish baby!"

"Baby!" he cried. "Jesus Christ!"

She lowered her shoulder to the bed and held out both arms to him. "Then don't go out tonight. Please! Stay here."

He hesitated, a pulse beating below his ear. "Why? If I stay now, you know what it means, don't you?"

“Oh, yes!” Now and forever. For better or worse. Hal had his curious code. “Please!”

“I can’t change,” he said.

“I know that. I don’t want you to. You wouldn’t be you. Aw, Hal, it’s been so long. I’m hungry for you!”

Gradually Davy’s unheeded crying died to a sleepy gurgle.

## PART VI

### I

COMING in by the kitchen after wiping his feet on the mat, Clint found Ida Heim busy with dinner. A remark about something's smelling good went unanswered, but as he reached the dining-room door the woman said, "Uh—Mr. Matlock!" She had been calling him Clint when she called him anything, and he was aware of a faint uneasy surprise. The next moment surprise was lost in shock. She said, "Mr. Matlock—I'm afraid you'll have to leave us."

"I beg your pardon?"

She repeated it. Still he could only echo, "Leave?" which brought a swift annoyance to her face. He stammered: "But this is— I don't know what to say. May I ask why you're—why I—"

"You may not."

He digested that, feeling a little sick. "But I've a right to an explanation, Mrs. Heim. This is pretty sudden. I never suspected— I was satisfied here and thought you'd been satisfied with me. I've tried to abide by the rules you laid down when I came—"

She looked at him for the first time directly. "Have you?"

"Yes! I think so."

Her faded bitter eyes searched his, and he bore the scrutiny with discomfort. Finally she made a grunting sound in her throat. "Um. Well, if I thought you hadn't, you wouldn't get off so easily."

Being kicked out was new to Clint, and he felt culpable, puzzled, and unhappy. "You can't do this to me without a reason," he insisted. "Tell me what I've done—or am suspected of."

She said wearily: "It's nothing you've done. At least I don't think so. And there's nothing you—or I—can do about it. I'm sorry, but that's all the explanation I can give."

There was silence. Clint raised his hands in a vague gesture. There seemed little more to do or say, and after a moment he bowed to the ultimatum with what grace he could.

"All right. I'll look for a new place in the morning—"

"I'll give you dinner, but you'll leave tonight."

"Tonight!" He began to get angry. "Mrs. Heim, I'm *glad* to leave! But this is ridiculous. Anyone gives reasonable notice—"

"I can't."

Bewildered and indignant, his mind had begun to adjust itself, to make sense of things. "There's something wrong with Mary, isn't there? She's sick."

It told. Ida said unsteadily, "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You've been saying she was. Today you took her to a doctor. Tonight you're asking me to leave—"

"*How did you know about the doctor?*"

"This morning, after breakfast, I was in my room and you and Mary were arguing in hers. I couldn't help hearing—"

"How much?"

"Very little, really. I gathered you'd made an issue of her seeing a doctor and she'd yielded, providing it was Mat Caron. You were holding out for some other man. Well, since you've asked me to leave, it seemed probable she saw one or the other and discovered something really wrong."

Watching her flush fade and her assurance return, Clint knew he had overheard less than he might have. She said: "Well—since you've guessed—yes, she is ill. Not seriously; she'll be in bed a week perhaps. And we're having a nurse. That's why I needed your room—"

"What's wrong with her?"

"Really!"

"I'm sorry. I meant, is it contagious—"

"Of course not, or we'd all be quarantined."

"I see." But he did not see.

"Remember," Ida said, "that what you've heard has been in confidence. I'll ask you to speak of it to no one."

Clint said, "Who? . . . Oh, hello, Ben. Yes, there is. Hang on."

It was Sunday morning, and the drivers were calling over the Roxbury wire long distance, leaving the direct line to the city open for customers.

"It's costing me money," Ben Goetz objected. "Hurry up."

Clint said unfeelingly: "You should have reversed the charges. Here we are. Millville's yours, isn't it? Know a Mrs. Chester?"

"Hey! That's one of the Ledmuller customers!"

"Not any more. She doesn't like being told where to buy things. She wants our milk. Today. So does Mrs. Pickett—"

"Another of 'em! Hot damn! That's half I got back now."

Clint reported this to Ed Thomas, who nodded with satisfaction.

The other telephone rang as Clint hung up, and Carly Groce answered it. "Weyland Meadows—" he began, and was interrupted by an irate voice booming in the receiver. "What's that? I didn't get the name. . . . Sartori? . . . 65 Dunbarton? I'm sorry, Mrs. Sartori, we had no choice. A court ordered us to re— . . . Yes, of course it's free— . . . Certainly you can take from any dairy— . . . We can have Mr. Roberts serve you within the hour. . . . Yes, certainly. Just leave a discontinue notice for Mr. Ledmuller— . . . What? . . . No, I'm sorry, we can't do it for you. Just write a note and leave it in his empty bottle— . . . Beg your pardon?"

The telephone bellowed, "I kint write it!"

"Oh! Well, there's the phone—"

"A nickel it cost me from a pay boot! It ain't woith it. To hell wit' him. I don't want his milk anyhow."

"But he'll leave it in the morning if you don't— Isn't there anyone in the family that writes? Or a neighbor? . . . No, Mr. Roberts can't. . . . Yes, he can write, but he's not allowed to! . . . Oh, *because it's against the law!*"

He hung up finally, mopping his face. "You take some of these calls," he muttered, "and see how blasted hard you laugh!"

"I didn't make a sound," the manager said.

Red Walsh came in as Carly scribbled Mrs. Sartori's name, address, order, and driver on the scratch pad, tore the leaf off, and passed it to Clint. "Many of those?" Red asked. All the farm knew a struggle was on, and that, while tomorrow would tell the story, today might be a straw in the wind. Red was not the first to come up.

Ed said cautiously, "Quite a few."

"So we got him on the run?"

"Oh—it's a drop in the bucket, Red, so far." Nevertheless he was looking self-satisfied.

Red muttered, "I don't get it. When we swiped the route the people hardly squawked, did they? And Isaac worked hard to get 'em back too."

"Maybe they're tired of being shoved around," Carly said.

But Ed shook his head. "No. It's easy to shove people around. Just tell 'em a court ordered it—if sheer inertia isn't enough. No, there's just one answer. They like our milk better."

Clint said: "Our taking Dunty made a difference. He was Isaac's only connection with the route. Made resoliciting difficult."



"And customers are loyal to their drivers," Carly nodded. "You'd see a difference if Isaac hired Sam."

Ed said: "Nonsense! They simply know better milk when they taste it. If there's loyalty, it's to the concern. Remember this past winter—"

The Roxbury telephone rang, and Clint said: "Weyland Meadows Dairy. . . . Oh, hello, Sam. Yeah, there's quite a few for you."

As he pulled the slips toward him, Carly's phone jangled too.

The manager spread his hands toward Red as much as to say, "See?"

That Sunday must have been discouraging to Ledmuller, but it was the work of Roberts and Bevis on Monday which crushed him. According to plan, they made the rounds, Sam taking those customers which had been his own, Bevis those which had been scattered among the other routes. They found bewilderment and resentment. The resentful needed little encouragement to switch back from Isaac. Others were glad to return to what they considered a better product once they had been assured that they could, while still more, liking their drivers, were willing to continue taking from them if it was "all right to." Only a minority were so indifferent or mistrustful that they proved difficult.

Back at the farm, having checked with Sam and the other boys, Bill Bevis reported to the manager, who had been apprehensive. After one look at Bill's grin he relaxed.

"Tell me about it," he said quietly.

"Pie!" To Bill, the whole thing was an escapade and a huge joke. "Sam's takin' a full load in the morning, and he'll get rid of most of it."

"What proportion did we get back?"

"About three-quarters of the route."

Ed Thomas sighed gently. "Good enough. Shouldn't wonder if Brother Ledmuller were around to see me soon. 'Deed I shouldn't!"

Ledmuller did not arrive till Wednesday, when only the shreds of his route were left him; but he was angry when he came.

"Where is that crook?" he demanded of Pettit. "That fella, that man, he's ruined me! Where is that dirty little—"

The bookkeeper pointed, and a cold smile touched his eyes as the man disappeared into the inner office; he had no sympathy for Isaac.

Ed Thomas, having been dragged through the courts, had no sympathy either, and found only perverse pleasure in the flood of invective with which Isaac faced him. Briefly he listened; and then, sensing the hysteria behind it, he grew apprehensive.

"O.K.—cut it!" he said. "If you've anything important to say, say it. Otherwise, get out. I'm busy."

The only answer was more accusation. Isaac sounded half crazy, and the manager, frowning, watched him warily. He expected nothing spectacular but recognized a state of mind which might work beyond shrillness and just possibly end in petty violence.

Still, he handled it firmly. "Isaac, shut up before I have you thrown out. You know you're licked. For God's sake, take it like a man!"

"But you stole my route, you—"

"Not this time. The customers returned of their own accord, so there's nothing you can do. Now quit calling me names; I don't like it."

There was little depth to Isaac's passion. Abuse yielded to plaintiveness. "But you couldn't do it to me. You gotta give it back."

"I did once. You couldn't hold it."

"You didn't give me a chance. My milk barely got delivered—"

"Am I running a charity, man? Be your age! We're in business. I complied with the court order and returned your route. It didn't stick. Now it's your move—if you've got the guts to play."

"What could I do? Nine-tenths of my route gone a'ready. And this new driver I got on contract hired. Ai! How could I pay him?"

"You're in a spot. So what? What do you want of me?"

Ledmuller merely moaned.

"Well, come on: why are you here? Just to call me names?"

"You gotta help me out."

Ed uttered a mirthless laugh. "So? How? Am I supposed to pay your man? give back the route? What?"

"I do' know. But something. You couldn't ruin me, Ed."

"I could, but I won't." He leaned forward sharply. "Weyland Meadows has financed you, accepted your bad milk, given you bargains in cows, feed, everything, let you get away with murder—God knows why. All right, we'll go on doing it—out of sheer habit. I'll help you: I'll buy your cows and whatever hay or feed you have. I'll make you an offer for your land and barns—"

"What? Wait a minute! You'll do—what? It's from out the milk business you'd kick me! You'd—"

"You're out already, Isaac—whether you know it or not."

"It's my living. I won't get out! I won't sell!"

"O.K.—but we're dropping you as a producer one week from today. We've taken your lousy milk as long as we're going to, far longer than was good for us. Your place has caused us more trouble than—"

"It's a good place. I make good milk—"

"You don't. You never will. You don't know what it is."

Isaac Ledmuller seemed to realize this was no ground for argument. "But on short notice, Ed—please!—you couldn't. What could I do? You taken my route away. I got no market left. How could I live?"

"Find another processor—you have a week. Or take my offer. I'll make it specific: I'll pay sixty-five apiece for any healthy animals—"

"Ai! The butcher would pay more for them dead, even!"

"Then kill 'em. For feed, hay, grain, ensilage—provided it's good—I'll pay 10 per cent under today's market."

"Robber! In a corner you get me, then tear my guts out—"

"No more names!" Ed bellowed. "Goddam it! I'm doing you a favor. I'm getting you out of the milk business with cash in your pockets. Now listen. For the land I'll pay full price after an impartial valuation; but you'll have to throw in barns, outhouses, and equipment—they're worth nothing anyway. As for the house, I'll have to look it over to see if we can adapt it before I make an offer—"

Ledmuller screamed, "No, no, no! I couldn't do it. Never—"

"It's up to you—but you're no good at the milk business, Isaac. You should realize it, and get out while you can sell."

"I'll sell my cows to the butcher and burn the barns for insurance. To you I wouldn't sell, ever. You crooked me. You—"

"The offer stands a week. After that it won't be so good."

"I won't take it. It ain't possible."

"All right, that's fine with me."

The danger of violence had passed: Isaac was still protesting, but there was no conviction in his protests. Ed rose, walked past him, and opened the door.

"Clint, will you run out to the new building and get Amos for me?" And deliberately: "We're having a change of producers; he'll have to get on the ball."

## II

CLINT had moved in with the Norths on Monday, and his change of address had not passed unnoticed. Tom and Clare, glad after Nancy's illness to have the extra money that a boarder meant, had, in their surprise, asked instinctive questions, and they were not the last. "But what

happened? You've stood the Heims so long! What did they do? What did you do?"

"Nothing. We simply decided to part friends."

He might have cooked up a story, but Ida had enjoined silence; if silence tended to arouse curiosity, he thought acidly, that was her fault. And it helped to do just that. If he had left them after a week or a month, the farm could have understood; what had precipitated a break after eleven months was a matter for speculation. When people asked if he had worn his shoes into the house or forgotten to tip his hat or tried to get fresh with Ida, Clint could grin and almost enjoy it. However, underneath he was uneasy. There were things unexplained about his departure from the Heims', and the more he thought about them the more unpleasant were their implications.

At first the talk made no mention of Mary, and for this he was thankful; but it did not last. At dinner Wednesday evening Clare asked abruptly, "What's wrong at Ida's?"

It caught Clint off guard. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," Clare said. She was a plain girl, and blunt. "Something sent you away from there in a hurry. I don't know what, but I heard something today that might be part and parcel of the same thing. There's trouble over there."

"Oh, I doubt it."

Tom said realistically: "Clint can't tell us the Heims' secrets. We wouldn't want him to leave here and tell ours, would we?"

"I'm not asking out of curiosity, and he knows it. If there's trouble, I want to help."

Clint asked, "What is it you've heard?"

"Several things. Tell me: Is the girl, Mary, sick?"

He said truthfully, "I don't know. Why?"

"First you were sent away, then Eunice—"

"Eunice! I hadn't heard that."

"She went Sunday to her aunt's—for a visit."

"Well—that might be so."

"Maybe. But Mrs. Cooper passed the Heim house last evening and she's going around saying she heard someone crying out inside." Clare paused effectively. "Kate says it was Mary—in pain."

Tom grunted, "Pshaw!"

"And Luella was telling somebody that Red had heard from Adrian that Mary actually is sick. Not seriously according to the story, but I

don't believe that. If so, why was Clint put out? and Eunice? I think something's wrong, Tom. Several of the girls do, and for once—"

"Good God, you're not getting in with that lot? Oh, hell! This is just the kind of nonsense women always build up into a stink."

Clint said suggestively, "Even if there is anything wrong, they're obviously keeping it a secret."

"Does that mean you don't know what's wrong?"

"I don't," he said honestly, "if anything is."

"I think someone should go over there and find out. They may need help badly. You've lived with them almost a year, Clint—"

"But I was kicked out once."

"You men are cowards! You make me tired. All right, I'll go myself. What can she do but slam the door in my face?"

Clint's own disquiet prompted him to let her interfere. Of all the farm, he would have trusted the motives and the silence of only Sonia and Clare, and he was inclined to believe anyway that Ida Heim was in no need of his protection.

Nor was she. Through a crack in the door, she told Clare firmly that Mary was sick abed with grippe but not seriously; that she was nursing her and needed no help with it.

"But it's not grippe," Clare insisted Thursday evening. "The woman's lying. I can tell. Something's terribly wrong over there."

"Maybe," Tom said, "but what can you do about it?"

Clare was not Ida's only visitor, nor the only one who departed convinced that the one thing Mary did not have was grippe. The mystery caused a pleasant, excited flurry, and Clint felt its backwash. Lying like a gentleman, he denied that the girl's illness was the reason he had left. She might have been slightly under the weather, he said, with a cold coming on; but the reason of his going was simply that he and Ida had decided to part. He was perfectly bland about it, yet could not help noticing and frowning over the fact that the kidding he had taken about leaving died abruptly. The icy finger of the intangible had briefly and almost imperceptibly chilled even the skeptics; a sense of things unexplained had taken the fun out of joking.

On Friday morning Ed Thomas, idling by chance at an office window, spotted Mat Caron's car on the County Road. "Wonder what he wants. . . . Um. Nothing, I guess; he's not coming in."

Clint, knowing better, left his desk and reached the window in time to see the coupé turn at the Ochs corner.

"Now what?" Ed muttered. "H'm—stopping at the Heims'. What's wrong there?" He was frequently the last to hear farm gossip.

Clint explained vaguely and watched Caron enter before returning reluctantly to work. Thereafter he held himself in conscious readiness for bad news.

It was Larry Ochs who brought it. He burst into the office, eyes bright with excitement, drawl shrill. "Hey, whaddaya know? That girl must be real sick! Adrian just come to the house to phone for an ambulance."

Clint, not particularly surprised, regarded him stolidly. The manager snapped his fingers in annoyance and walked into the inner office. Pettitt let his lip curl in contempt of the Heims and their troubles and returned to work. Larry, taken aback, departed to spread his news in more responsive places.

When he had gone Clint rose slowly and went to the window, where presently Ed joined him. Together, in silence, they watched the first curiosity seekers drift toward the Heims'. When the wail of a siren became audible far down the road, the manager stirred and muttered, "I've the strangest, most unpleasant feeling about this—"

Behind them Pettitt snorted.

The siren brought people on the run from the creamery, the barns, the boarding house, from every home and building on the place; even Swan Ellis's field hands could be seen pelting toward the focus of excitement from far across the road. The streaming lines, converging beyond the bull pen, became a crowd that milled slowly between the Heims' and the Ihloffs'. Across the slope of the garage roof, over the heads of the curious, between the distant houses, the watchers in the office saw the ambulance turn, back up, and finally stop, saw an aisle instinctively opening between it and Ida's porch.

Ed kept slapping fist into palm. "Damn! If it isn't one thing, it's another. Hope it's not serious. Hope it's not catching. Good Lord! They wouldn't quarantine the whole farm, would they?"

Carly, who had joined them, kept asking futile questions, while Clint, his mind too full for words, watched thin-lipped. If Caron had sent for an ambulance only minutes after his arrival, it sounded serious.

The distant crowd surged, parted; and white-coated men passed through it to the ambulance. Little could be seen of the figure they bore, even when the stretcher was lifted inside. One of the interns clambered in with it, the doors closed; the other pushed through a storm of questions to the driver's seat. An instant later the ambulance slipped smoothly toward the corner. On the County Road it gathered speed, its siren snarl-

ing as it passed the farm drive. Those in the office, like the crowd on the ground, watched it till it was out of sight.

Ed said suddenly, "I'd better go over there."

"Wait. Caron's leaving now."

The crowd pressed about the doctor as he forced his way toward the parked coupé. Reaching it, Caron faced about, said a few words. There were questions, but he checked them and spoke again, briefly. His listeners shifted, turned, parted, swirled in a tiny whirlpool around the Heims, who were pushing as rapidly as the crowd permitted to the car door Caron held open for them. They kept their heads down, their faces half hidden, and when they reached the coupé they climbed past the wheel instead of going to the far door. Caron slipped in after them, and the car started with a jerk. As it swung left beyond the house, Ed muttered: "So. He's coming this way. Good."

But the car passed the horse barns, took the turn at the sheds with dangerous speed, sped by the creamery, turned into the County Road, and disappeared. The boys who had raced across the lawns to intercept Caron if he stopped at the office slowed down in defeat. At the empty house, the mob curdled into groups, and men began straggling back to work or home.

Ed said: "Now I wonder what it's all about. Why didn't Mat stop and tell me before he went?"

"He seemed in a hurry," Clint said inanely.

The crowd broke up slowly. As its fringes drifted back, Ed muttered: "Here comes Red. I'll holler for him."

He opened the window, and they heard Kenny Ihloff saying to someone: "Jeez, she was red! Wonder if it's scarlet fever or anything?"

Ed growled, "Judas!"

Other scraps drifted up: "Naw. Unconscious. I know she was." And Luella Walsh's prim "No, she was moaning. I was close enough to hear, and there were no words at all."

Clint saw Mickey Pratt and hailed him. "Hey, Mick! Come up a minute, will you?"

The boy raised a pale, drawn face, and shook his head. After a moment he called: "I—I can't. Not right now." He moved with dazed uncertainty toward the boarding house.

Ed was mildly surprised. "What's hit him?"

Red Walsh came up presently, his gray, coarse, grease-ingrained features solemn. To the manager's questions, he shrugged gloomily. "Search me. Nobody seems to know what gives. You can bet it's serious, though."

They were in an almighty hurry, and I'd guess she had a hell of a fever. She kept tossing around, muttering and moaning to herself—

"What did the doctor say?"

"Nothin'—'cept it wasn't contagious and we needn't worry."

"Did the Heims—"

"The Heims didn't say nothin' at all."

"Damn! Well, what are people guessing, then?"

"Haw!" Walsh raised his head mirthlessly. "What aren't they?"

Ed got a call from Mat Caron later. "By God, it's about time!" he exploded. "What's this about, anyway?"

"I wanted to let you know there was no need to worry. Sorry if I caused undue excitement by carting that girl off the way I did, but it was necessary. However, it's nothing contagious. No need for anyone else to be disturbed—"

"But is it serious? What's wrong?"

"I can't tell you, naturally. You'll have to ask the Heims. Yes, I'm afraid it is serious. Quite."

"They're guessing here it's acute appendicitis. Are they warm?"

"No, but it's a belief that could well be encouraged."

Neither Ida nor Adrian returned Friday night. There was no word from the hospital, and telephone calls elicited no more than that Mary's condition was unchanged. With no definite news and no one to question save Clint—who was now as much in the dark as anyone—speculation was rife and might well have been wild but for the mundane reasonableness of appendicitis. The Heims' secrecy was accounted for by the assumption that Ida had waited too long before calling Caron, or had tried home remedies with disastrous results. It was a twist that appealed to the farm, and to none more than Ida's old cronies in gossip.

Nevertheless, Ed Thomas, with the half-knowledge that Caron had imparted, felt he was sitting on a volcano. He sensed a situation whose facts and implications were more serious than was being admitted; and, until he was sure it was not going to affect the farm, he would be uneasy. He haunted the office and the telephone.

The break did not come until midafternoon Saturday. It was an urgent call from the hospital for Clint Matlock. Mary was asking for him.

Wharton Pettitt, whose afternoon it was to work, took the message and looked automatically into the drivers' room for someone to take it to Norths'.

Before he could rap on the window, however, the manager said, "I'll



go tell him." He felt grateful for the malaise which was his only excuse for lingering there on a Saturday afternoon.

With his hand on the door, he hesitated. "Whart, there's not much point asking you this—you live off the place and don't do much talking anyway; but—ah—I'd like this kept quiet."

"Why?" Petitt's brows rose.

Ed shrugged. "I don't know, but I do. It's orders, Whart."

Petitt said, "You're getting as oversensitive as a woman."

Clint left for the hospital at once.

The manager asked the Norths not to mention his going, and the Norths kept the secret. Sunday was Clint's morning to work, but he was not back; quietly, Ed Thomas covered for him; lounging about the office, he explained to all who asked that he was filling in for Clint, who had stepped out.

On Monday it was no longer possible to hide Clint's absence, and Ed explained that he had been sent to the hospital to find out how matters stood. "I told him to stay until he got some facts," he said. Wharton Petitt heard this with contemptuous bitterness; but the manager stuck to it. To the bookkeeper, Clint's absence was an exasperating annoyance, because it meant that he must figure the dealers' bills for the week. He grumbled about it all day.

The continued silence about the Heims annoyed the farm in general. Telephone calls to the hospital elicited no information, and a personal visit by a couple of the women proved to be an utter waste of time. The disappearance, and the silence of everyone connected with the affair, piqued curiosity and irritation. Talk, which had somewhat died down over the week end, started up again.

Clint came in Tuesday morning about nine-thirty, looking as though he had not slept in the interval.

Petitt said, "So you decided to come back?" A straight look from unreadable eyes was the only answer.

To Ed, Clint nodded, walking stiffly to his desk. The manager was shocked by his looks. His face was gray with weariness; there was a hollow flatness to his face, a tightness of lips compressed over set teeth; he had grown older, and something had gone out of him.

"What are they saying?" he asked.

"They're still talking about appendicitis, I think," Ed said.

"Ah!" Clint's shoulders straightened on the sigh.

"How's Mary?"

The boy drew a heavy breath. "Mary died early this morning."

The manager went white. A pencil dropped from the bookkeeper's fingers, and slowly, without volition, he rose to his feet muttering:

"Died! Why, I didn't realize—didn't understand it was so—"

"I imagine not."

"What did she have?" Ed asked. "What did she die of?"

"Blood poisoning. We could stretch a point and say peritonitis—that's near enough for all practical purposes—"

"By all means. But what's the truth of it? What's—"

"I'm sorry. Please understand: I was sent for—and learned more than I should have. I can't very well repeat it—"

"But, dear God, how am I going to know what to say? what *not* to say? How am I going to answer questions? You can't leave me utterly in the dark, Clint!"

"I'm sorry. If Adrian wants you to know—"

"Where is he, then? How can I get in touch with him?"

"You can't. If he wants to, he'll get in touch with you."

"But when'll he be back? When—"

Clint shook his head. "There's a good chance that none of the Heims will ever be back."

It was a terrible morning with everyone coming to the office who could find an excuse. Clint hated the morbid excitement and curiosity his news caused, and sometimes, in his contempt, remained barely civil. The nightmare was the worse because of a haunting fear that his numbed mind, careless in anger, might betray the very secrets it was trying to guard.

At noon he gave up and told Ed he would not be back after lunch.

Going home, he met Mickey Pratt, who stopped him to ask if what they were saying about Mary's death was the truth. It was the same query he had been hearing all morning; but the tone it was asked in penetrated his exhaustion. Remembering Mickey's distress the morning Mary was taken away, he said, "Um-hum, I'm afraid so, Mick."

"Were you—were you with her?"

"Yes. Off and on. She wasn't conscious except at intervals."

"W-what was wrong?"

Trying to analyze what he was hearing, Clint thought he distinguished anxiety that was almost fear, grief, perhaps anguish; but there were other elements too, even harder to get hold of.

"I can't tell you. Ask the Heims."

"But I hafta know! I have to, Clint. It's important!" Mickey had no words to express his desperate need, but the urgency was in his voice.

Clint shook his head and tried to pull away from the detaining hand.

"No—wait, Clint! You *gotta* tell me. I gotta know. Can't you understand, it's— I *hafta* know!"

"Mick, if I were you, I'd show less interest—less distress—over Mary's death. I didn't suppose you knew her more than casually. Most people don't know it, I imagine. So it might be wise—for her memory and for her parents' sake—not to ask questions. It might put ideas into our heads. Think it over."

He swung off across the lawns, leaving Mickey white.

### III

WHAT happened Wednesday was as spectacular in a quiet way as Mary's death had been shocking. It was a hot, peaceful afternoon. Clint Matlock and the bookkeeper were sweating over routine work, and Bill Bevis was jawing in the inner office with the manager. Isaac Ledmuller entered, tall, thin, gray, his clothes sagging on him, the flesh of his face sagging too. His step was shuffling and tired, anger and life had left his eyes; and the two in the office, who had tensed instinctively, relaxed, sensing that this was not the man who had burst in raging a week ago. A tic had developed in one of his cheeks. He asked dully:

"He in? Could I see him? Would it be all right?"

"Certainly. Go in. Bevis is there, but they're not busy."

The man moved with an effort, halting on the threshold.

Ed Thomas's voice sounded flat. "Oh—hello, Isaac. Come in. No, don't go, Bill. This shouldn't take long."

The Jew stood silent, hands at his sides.

"Well, come in, come in. Close the door."

As the door shut, Clint said, "That's a beaten man."

"Isaac?" Petitt snorted. "Nonsense! Got something up his sleeve."

The producer said, "My milk you left on the stand today."

"I told you I'd take it only a week more."

"But the week, it ain't up yet till tomorrow—"

"It was up last night. But what's a day's difference? You've a new market, haven't you?" Isaac shook his head.

"Sorry, but you had your notice. I can't carry you any longer—"

"Sure. I know. So I come to sell."

Ed made an involuntary face. "What? Sell? Oh, now look here, have you tried to find a processor, Isaac? Did you clean up?"

"I tried, sure."

"I'll have to think about this. I didn't expect you back, you see—not after your saying I'd be the last you'd sell to. I'm not sure—"

"What could I do? A week, it ain't much time."

"Isaac, I don't believe you've even looked for a market." And when the other did not deny it: "I don't really want the place, you know."

"You said you'd buy. You made terms."

Ed set both hands on the desk top and scowled. He had made the offer, all right, but half seriously. It had been done on impulse, in the thought that if he could get the place cheap it might make one in the chain of farms Clint had suggested; but, like most of his impulses, it had seemed less brilliant on sober thought, and he had been thankful it was turned down. The chain-farm idea was not yet official, and, though one or two tentative steps had been taken, he was not prepared to sink a substantial amount of money into it. The investment, even at bargain price and deducting Isaac's long-standing bill, would be larger than he could readily afford, the new creamery having just been paid for and the bank balance being low. It might jeopardize the raises promised for June, to say nothing of the chance of buying new routes this summer—now a serious and inviting possibility. There were, too, the practical difficulties of management.

As always, he thought acidly, his impulses had betrayed him into trouble. It had certainly been one thing after another all spring!

Still, he had made the offer. He couldn't very well get out of it.

Or could he?

He had remembered something. He said, "I also told you that offer was good one week only—afterwards it'd be less."

"But it ain't a week—"

"A week and a day. Wednesday to Tuesday would be a week. Or, if you like, Wednesday morning to Wednesday morning. This is afternoon. No, I couldn't pay more than sixty apiece for your animals now—"

A spasm flickered across those gray features.

"Oh, you'd get more generous terms in a dozen places. I wish you would!"

"I'll take it," Isaac mumbled.

Ed's jaw set. "Wait till you've heard the rest." At some point the man would rebel; it was not in him to be badly beaten. Or, Ed wondered, had he something up his sleeve?

Isaac did not rebel. What Ed and Petitt could not understand and Clint could was that he was broken—not so much by the farm, which had merely given the *coup de grâce*, as by the long failure of his life.

Bill Bevis, who had been a silent witness, returned to the drivers' room red with suppressed delight. The boys were still there, though Ben Goetz was finished and just leaving. Bill pushed him back to a seat and said:

"Hey, bastards: know what? . . . Ledmuller's give up. Starting tomorrow we get back the tag ends of his route that we didn't before. Deliver 'em in the morning."

"What'll we say," Ben asked, "if they want to stick to Isaac?"

"Tell 'em he's out of business," Bill giggled. "And how!"

Sam Roberts said oddly, "Out of business, Bill?"

"We're buying him out, land, barns, everything."

Sam nodded. "That could be the best answer."

"The way Ed went at it, it was the only one! Goddam, if he'd asked for the guy's daughter to seal the bargain, I bet he'd 've got her." Bill chuckled all over. "And he damn near did!"

He hoisted himself to a seat on the table, getting in the way of Chief Myhychyk, who started punching his thigh to make him move.

"He skun him," Bill said. "With a piece of sandpaper. Oh, Jesus!"

Lew Barchi, from his corner by the water cooler, was watching Sam. The other boys were moving mechanically about their work while they listened; but Sam had stopped at the first mention of Ledmuller, and was sitting before his open route book with an expression of distaste on his handsome lips.

Barchi prodded gently. "What d'ya mean, Bill? You can't skin a Jew. Not that bad."

"Goddam it, Ed did it. I couldn't see where we had him over the barrel so bad; but Ed knew, and whaled into him. We're buying him out and doing it at—I do' know—half what it's worth. Maybe less."

Tom North muttered: "You won't get away with it. Not with Isaac."

"Nuts! We did. You never seen nothin' like it. The guy was licked."

The Chief said, "Y' can't lick a man so bad he'll give his stuff away."

But Ben Goetz said unexpectedly: "That's something you thickheads 'd

never know; but you can. A man can get it so bad he don't care any more. He'll say Yes to anything, just to be left in peace. I know. It could happen to me."

Barchi's long lips thinned into a smile, for Sam was angry. He sat there, eyes down, hands loose on his book; but a tiny shudder had twitched his shoulders, and his face was taut.

"For the cows, sixty apiece," Bill was saying.

"That bad, chief?"

"Hell, Chief, it's less'n half what we inventory our own at—and any cow still able to stand up 'll fetch more from the butcher! Hell, a week ago Ed himself offered Isaac sixty-five. It was like that all the way down. For feed, hay, grain—hell, a week ago he offered 10 per cent off the market, which most farmers 'd think was a swell bargain. Today we got it at a whole third off. The land we're going to pay full price for"—Bill chuckled till his body shook—"but the price is goina be tax valuation."

Tom nodded. "Which Isaac's prob'ly sweated for years to keep at rock bottom! That's sticking him with his own pitchfork."

"Yeah, and it hurt. He squealed like hell trying to get Ed to agree to a new, impartial valuation—I guess that's what Ed offered him earlier; but no go. He knuckled under soon as Ed got tough, and we're making him throw in his barns, house, and equipment free."

"There's a catch," Tom said. "Isaac wouldn't take that lying down."

Barchi muttered reverently, "Sam, Sam—god-dam! what a man."

There was a titter, but Sam Roberts's eyes leapt to meet his.

Abruptly there was electricity in the air. The titter died, and the silence that followed was more than the absence of talk; it was the utter suspension of movement as well.

Barchi said deliberately, blandly, "I'd say he kicked Brother Ledmuller in the slats when he was down."

Color flooded Hal Roane's face, but no one saw it. All eyes were on Sam, and there was no one in the room but understood what Barchi was attempting. They were taken by surprise, but the vital significance of it, as much as its unexpectedness, was what startled them. Suddenly the strike they had talked of, worked toward, and dreaded was a probability. Inevitably, excitement touched them, and a thrill of fear. Their tension mounted with the silence till it was a physical presence in the room.

One or two thought that Barchi had gone off half-cocked, for only the slow ebb and flow of blood in Sam's face showed that he was shaken

with anger. It took seconds for the less observant to see it and realize that Lew Barchi was no fool.

It was controlled anger, and it stayed controlled. As soon as Sam sensed the silence and realized that he was the focus of attention, he took himself roughly in hand, consciously relaxing.

"A kick and a brutal one," he said, "but Ed's not here to hit."

"There's more than one way of hitting."

"None of 'em any good."

A shift and movement as the drivers sensed that Barchi had failed. Disappointment—and relief—and a flatness like stale cigarette smoke.

Bill Bevis said, "I seen you once when you didn't think that, Sam."

Sam nodded. "I'm afraid I've a temper I don't always control; but I've never been anything but sorry after it's exploded. I've used force, yes—but not with malice aforethought—and I won't. It's no good."

Barchi said: "O.K., fella. I shot my bolt. If this business hasn't snapped you out of it, nothing will. I'm through trying." He got to his feet. "Know what I'm going to do? I'm going out and drink to the boys in beer. A drink to Ed, a drink to Isaac, and a drink to the Weyland Meadows Drivers' Association, deceased. How about it, Sam? Come along?"

"Not in the mood for beer," Sam answered.

"Nor milk, I guess. We could make it stronger." When Sam hesitated Barchi added with startling prescience, "Hell, guy, you don't want to drink alone!"

"I don't want to talk about Isaac Ledmuller either."

"O.K. That's up to you. It's a promise."

Sam laughed shortly. "O.K. What the hell! Soon's I finish."

It was nine-thirty, and Sam Roberts was in a very sour mood. "This is the damndest, dirtiest place I was ever in. The air's nothing but cigarette smoke and stink, and the steaks are the toughest I ever bit into. The more I eat, the hollower I feel, and be goddammed if I can get drunk. I keep shoving my money across and never get anywhere. What they giving me—water?"

"Nope."

"Then what's the matter with me?"

"Must have an ironclad gut."

"Only time I ever wanted to get pie-eyed, and I can't. I can feel it at the end of my tongue and my fingers; but down the middle of me there's a pillar of cold soberness."

"Oh, beautiful mood!" Lew Barchi muttered.

"Bring me a brandy," Sam said to the waiter who had come to remove the greasy remnants of their dinner. "I want to forget something. Want to forget my job, see? My new job—only been on it a month an' a half, but I wanta forget it. I don't like it out there."

"I been there eight years," Barchi said, "and don't either."

"Then why not get out?"

Barchi considered. "Why don't you? Jobs 're like a street full of lil shops. That's what a businessman told me once. 'Lew,' he said, 'you complain about what we offer here. Well, if you don't like my goods, why not shop elsewhere? You don't have to trade with me! Lots of stores on the street.'"

"Lots of 'em!" Sam repeated. "Only you have to trade somewhere or starve, and the good places 're so crowded you can't reach a counter!"

"Sure you can. 'F you don't like it here, go on—scram."

"'F you don't like it, why don't *you* scam?"

"That's different. Places I don't like, I try to change. Hell," Lew said, "when the dairy gets decent, that's when I'll get out. That's how I'm built. I like changing things."

Roberts welcomed his brandy with open arms and said expansively, "Lew, I didn't like you at first. I do now. You contribute. You got courage to fight for a better world. Wish I had."

Lew nodded. "I didn't like you either: you spoiled my plans."

"Still do, I guess. You want me to leave—right?"

"Sure. I tried to get you in with us. No good! Well, if you quit, we might get a new driver I could talk to. And why not? You don't like us. Why stay?"

Sam's face twisted. "That's too goddam true. I'm a dog in the manger. I hate things as they are, and won't change 'em—and won't get out so someone else can change 'em. . . . Oh, let's get the hell out of here! I feel lousy."

At a place called Joe's, Sam had some more brandy. At a place called the Tavern he switched in disgust to rye. At one called purely and simply Beer, the inevitable happened, and he departed in sweating and unsteady haste for the men's room.

Lew Barchi watched with a shake of the head and a sigh. Only once since they hit town at five o'clock had he got Roberts to talking; and nothing had come of that. Now it was too late; when he returned, he would be ready for sleep.

But Sam was not ready for sleep. About the time Lew was thinking



of getting the bartender's help and going after him, he came back, pale but clear-eyed and walking steadily.

"Give me a Scotch," he said. "Then we'll go somewhere else."

Goggling a little, Lew protested.

Sam spread his hands. "Of course I've had enough. More than enough—but am I drunk? No! I've poured it down all evening, and it's made me sick; but I can't feel anything. Hell of a thing!"

Lew shrugged and beckoned the bartender.

"What's wrong with me?" Sam demanded. "Why don't I do things all men ought to? Like getting put in jail once in a while, or making the world better for other people: things every man does at least once. Why are you, whom I dislike, a driving force while I'm merely an obstacle?"

A girl in a clinging sweater and skin-tight slacks drifted up. "I'm waiting for someone, and the place is crowded. Mind if I sit at your table till he comes?"

"Make yourself at home," Sam said. "You know what'll happen when we die, Lew? St. Peter'll make a report. He'll say: 'Lew Barchi had a strong soul in an ugly body. He was of use to the world. We'll send him to heaven.' Then he'll say: 'Sam Roberts had a wishy-washy soul in a beautiful body. He believed wonderful things—and never did much about 'em. We'll pave the way to hell with him.' To hell with him," Sam repeated morosely. "And he'll be right."

The girl said: "For a good-looker, you shore got troubles, big shot. Y' need a drink—and I could do with one too, while I wait."

"Lew—buy her one. She put her finger on the point: I'm a good-looker, and that's all you can say for me. Why? What's wrong with me?"

"Element'ry," Lew Barchi said, feeling the need to talk. "You're on a dilemma. In one. You're an idealist—but not just about one thing. About lotsa things. Clear?"

"I don't understand it at all."

"Neither do I," the girl said. "And who cares? He said buy me a—"

"It's simple," Barchi explained. "You got an ideal about Management and Labor. You can see something's wrong. But then you got another: you don't believe in force. Well, you can't change things without force, so you're in the middle, wanting to shatisfy one ideal but not able to do it ithout smas'ing the other. So you don't do anything. Simple!"

"I b'lieve you're right," Sam said. "A dilemma. H'm—a psychological dilemma. Yes, sir! One of those things a man goes crazy over—"

"Or a woman," the girl said. "Jesus Christ!" She got up and walked off, and the men barely noticed she had gone.

"You think I'm going crazy, Lew?"

"Nah. You're just feeling your drinks."

Sam brooded. "If I'm feeling 'em, it's not in a nice way. . . . 'Lo, pussy." He reached down and scratched the bar's cat, which promptly leapt into his lap. "Likes me. Glad somebody does."

"He wants food," Barchi said practically.

"Nice pussy. Beautiful, handsome, royal-gray pussy. Goina steal it. Always wanted a gorgeous big Angora alley cat."

"They'll give it to you 'f you ask."

"I want to steal it! Stealing's something else I've never done."

"Stealing it 'd mean using force," Lew said slyly.

"Force? . . . Oh! . . . Well, what of it?"

"Hell of an idealist, you are."

"Can't you see, Lew, I'm trying to have a good time, and it's very difficult? I want someone to see us stealing it and chase us! I'll put it under my coat." The cat objected to this, and Sam compromised by carrying it under his arm. "Come on. They'll be more likely to chase us this way."

They walked out. No one chased them. Sam paused on the street, disgusted.

"Fine thing! Letting thieves get away with theft right under their noses!"

A policeman stood under a street light swinging his club. Sam spotted him and weaved forward.

"Officer, I have just stolen this animal from that bar. I think I should be put in jail. Don't you?"

Lew Barchi plucked at his arm. "Hey—forget it! We got routes to deliver in a couple of hours."

"I shall be in no condition to deliver 'em."

The policeman said, "Gwan home and sleep it off."

"But we're perfectly respectable," Sam said. "We can prove it. Lew, show him your shoshial shecurity card. I mean your shoshial shecurity card. Anyway, s'ow it to him."

"Get along with ye," the cop said. "Take my advice and go home."

They went to a succession of bars instead.

The early hours of the morning found them in a diner halfway out of town, sitting uninterested before two steaming cups of black coffee.

They had had the noble idea of sobering up before going to work, but neither quite liked to begin.

For some time and with great distaste, Sam had been studying a row of custard pies displayed beneath a glass cover on the counter. He said at last, deliberately: "I wish Ed were here. I'd like to throw one of those at him." He considered. "Would throwing a pie be force?"

"No. Sticking his face in one would be, but throwing it—no. 'Cause, if it hit, it'd be accident."

"Good. I don't like him much. Not pers'nally, but as a businessman. 'D I ever tell you why I don't like businessmen?"

"Yeah. Trouble with you is, you don't like nothin'. You don't like management. You don't like unions. Well, what does that get you? A guy's gotta like one side or the other."

"No, he don't. He can hate both."

"You're irrational and illogical," Barchi said painfully. "You can be a dog or you can be a cat, but you gotta be one."

"I don't. I can be a horse. I am one. I'm for a new system."

"Ain't any other."

"No, but there could be: cooperation."

Barchi smirked. "Scuse my smile. We tried and got kicked. Nope: Ed and us are on different sides, and 'll never get together."

"You're on the same side, only neither of you knows it. No, wait. What's Ed want out of this business? Profit an' more profit. O.K. So how's he trying to get it? By building the business, expanding, getting bigger. Right. Now what do *we* want?"

"Our rights. More money, more comfort—"

"Sure. And we'll get more of all of 'em as the business grows—right? An' that's the only way we can get more. So-o we're working—fun'amentally—for just what Ed's working for, fun'amentally: growth. A' right. So can a business grow to bes' advantage when the two main parts of it are fighting?"

"No." Lew Barchi shook his head solemnly.

"Then the best thing for all of us is to quit fighting and cooperate. Only both sides 've used force and hate each other, so they don't. So I say unions are done, an' maybe management's done too. So I say down with both of 'em. Get a new system."

"There ain't any."

"You said that before, but if men and bosses all realized that working-for-the-business was even more working-for-themselves than *just* working-for-themselves, there might be. 'S that clear?"

"No."

"Well, look! D' you believe in the Declaration of Independence?"

"You goddam right. You think I'm a lousy Communist?"

"The question was rhetorical," Sam said. "The guys back there had some good ideas—right? There was that slogan, No Taxation 'thout Representation. Right today we could use the fella who thought that up."

"How? What'd we do with him?"

"Make him put it into words about business 'nstead of government. Business don't tax us—but it passes lotsa laws about us that we got no say in. I think we oughta have."

"So do I."

"Remember, though: representation didn't end taxation. Some men thought it would, but when we got to running our own government we found we had to have taxes or else! Plenty of 'em. See what I mean?"

"No. . . . But it's a beautiful thought."

"I mean, if we ever get a say about running a business, we'd find out lots of the rules they been laying down were rules we gotta have. We couldn't abolish everything we'd like to—or vote ourselves big raises. 'Cause if we did, we wouldn't have any jobs left."

"Let's drink on that," Lew said. "It's very profound."

They gulped coffee solemnly and had the boy behind the counter refill their cups so that they would be ready for the next profound thought when it was produced.

Sam frowned. "What that Declaration said about political freedom, 'plies to industrial freedom too: we don't like tyranny. What gripes me is how your businessman hollers loudest about liberty, individualism, democracy, and all the time operates under a system that's dictatorship. Tells us what to do and when to do it; executes us s'marily if we make a mistake; even resents our thinking any way but his own. Right of ownership, he says, of private property."

"I don't like 'em either," Lew said. "But what's the answer?"

Sam passed a tired hand over his face. "Not unions. They've brought us a long way at the cost of hate, and of sowing seeds of reaction that'll destroy 'em. But—they got the wrong goal."

"All they want's to get as much as they can for the boys."

"Go far enough, an' that means complete destruction of management."

Lew said, "Pers'nally, I don't want that at all."

"That's because you're a good guy. But that's what unions are out for. In the end. And suppose they win? Will we be any better off? Or will

we have traded one set of bosses for another? Or will the government step in and take over? If the unions win, what system will they set up? D'you know? D' they?"

Lew shook his head. "If not unions—what's the answer?"

"Wha' was the political answer? Representation. Responsibility."

"That calls for a drink," Lew said. "How do we get it?"

"We ask the boy for it."

"No, no, no. The responsibility."

"How did we get it politically? We elected a Congress, and then sat back and let 'em make laws. And we hollered when they didn't do it right. And if we made mistakes we had no one to blame but ourselves and no one to hate for it—and we learned to change our minds. How has it worked?"

"Fair," Lew said, "from time to time."

"Most of us don't want to change it anyhow. But people are thinking about changing our industrial system—which means it hasn't measured up. Only—what should we change it to? Fascism, Communism, or something like what's worked pretty fair for us politically?"

"You mean we'd elect managers?"

"Well, the way I'd do it, is to have the owner appoint the manager, and our elected representatives vote confidence in him. And instead of reelecting him every so often, I'd let him hold his job just as long as they had confidence. That's sort of English," Sam said apologetically, "but their system has some points good enough to use. I'd let him set the general policy and recommend specific laws, only the representatives 'd have to pass 'em. They could make their own too, o' course. The manager could veto 'em, but he could be overridden. Representatives 'd be elected every so often so they'd keep close to the boys. See what it means? If things weren't going right, 'nstead of striking, we'd just elect new representatives! No more time lost, or pay, or good will. An' it'd end a lot of government regulation of business *and* of unions. It'd be a whole lot of little democracies within a democracy."

"On'y it wouldn't work. Remember the national debt, the pork barrel—"

"Well, government can lose money, but a business can't. When people found that raiding the treasury meant a sick business or even losing their jobs, they'd stop and think. They'd have to. They'd find they'd have to learn about depreciation, int'rest, all the rest they make faces over now. They'd learn to see management's side, that they don't now. They'd have to. That's what responsibility is, and it'd be good for 'em." .

Lew said, "That too, is profound. . . . Only how do we get it? Like here. Ed, with a few department heads, runs this place, an' the other sixty or seventy of us can ask for responsibility or any other goddam thing and get only a smile. Hell, management'll never let us into its holy of holies!"

"Maybe not. Just the same, it'd have to start with management. In some little place like this, maybe—only with an executive who has vision, courage, and conviction. But if it worked one place, it'd spread; don't worry about that."

Silence. Then Lew Barchi sighed. "A system like that 'd be the end of guys like me. . . . But I could be sold on it. Down underneath, maybe I dream too."

"*You* don't stop with dreaming."

Barchi said grandiloquently, "You *too* could hold people spellbound!" but both were far soberer than they had been. "No: if I got an idea half as good as yours, I wouldn't sit on my ass thinking about it: I'd go out and sell it."

"I guess you would. But me? Oh, no, not me! I haven't the guts to get up and yell against a dirty deal when I see it!"

"Ledmuller?"

Sam flared suddenly. "Damn it, guy, can't you see? I've spent the whole afternoon, the whole evening, trying to drown the conviction of what I have to do! Ah-h-h—my ideas are half baked, but Isaac Ledmuller's a reality; and so—damn blast it!—is what Ed did to him. I've drunk liquor for four hours—and still haven't washed *that* out of my guts. Maybe only one thing will—I do' know."

Occasionally Barchi was intuitive, and he was now: he did not press. The silence held for quite a while.

Then Sam said, "It's time to go to work." And, rising: "If I feel the same way Saturday, Lew, I'll get in touch with you."

## IV

"You holding out on me?" Swan Ellis said. "Or didn't you know Ed's been having visitors?"

Amos Vliet lounging in the living-room arch, eyes on the stairs, said, "Hell, no! Now that I'm in the new building, I never know what's going on at the office."

"Thought Ed might have brought him to see the plant."

"No. Why? Who was it?"

"Purdy," Swan said, the lowered newspaper rustling in his suddenly restless hands. "I. R. Purdy of Eastern Dairies."

Amos said nothing, but his eyes swiveled to rest thoughtfully on Swan's leathery face.

"It's his second visit in the last few weeks. Something's up."

"Ed moving?"

The farm man shrugged.

"There was talk of it last summer, but after Steve went instead it sort of died."

Swan said: "The farm has just given Eastern a hell of a fight in this town. Ed's stock may have risen."

Amos nodded slowly. "If he goes, I wish you luck, Ellis."

"Do you? When we talked before, I had something to offer. Now you got your plant and have damned little to hope for, if I move up. That job might not be the steppingstone for me that it's been for the rest."

Amos said: "The plant managership was start enough for Steve. I'll hope for a good recommendation some day."

"You'll get it." Swan's face lightened.

Amos's gaze came back to the stairs, for feet were clacking in the upper hall. In spite of wishing Swan luck, he hoped Ed Thomas was not moving; it was too early for that. A bit desperately, he wondered if there were another explanation to account for Purdy's visit.

Then Freda came down to him, and he forgot Ed, Purdy, and the farm.

"Hi," he said. "You're looking good."

## V

ON Friday of that week Chief Myhychyk brought dynamite to the dairy in the form of the local newspaper. On an inside page were a few paragraphs under the head, "Local Woman Held in Daughter's Death":

Mrs. Ida Heim, 43, giving as her address the Hotel Stafford King, this city, was yesterday bound over to the grand jury by Magistrate Hugh Keneally on a charge of complicity in the death of her daughter, Miss Mary Beatrice Heim, 19, who died at City Hospital Tuesday morning of septicemia

following an illegal operation. At the same time Dr. Fritz Quincy, 37, of 29 E. Third Street, was held on a charge of murder. . . .

On Saturday morning Clint faced Ed Thomas across the manager's desk, and they were grim young men.

Ed asked thinly, "Is it true?"

"That's up to the jury to decide," Clint said, deliberately evasive.

"But you know, don't you? . . . Well, if it is, it—uh—implies—"

Clint waited bleakly. Ed developed a sweat.

"I'm—ah—afraid I'll have to ask a personal question, Clint. Don't get angry. It'll be asked by many, I guess—considering you lived at the Heims'—and were sent for from the hospital—"

"Get at it," Clint said bluntly.

"Well, do I take it you are—ah—*not* the man in the case?"

"I am *not*!"

"Oh! . . . Well, it looked—I wondered— You were sent for—"

"You said that. I was—but not in the role you imply."

"Why, then?"

"I can't tell you why."

"You make it awkward," Ed complained. "I don't blame you for going, of course, when you didn't know what was wrong, but—"

"I'd have gone even if I had."

"Oh, certainly." Ed was conscious of his own stuffiness. "But it puts you in an unfortunate light. People may jump to conclusions. I'm already worried about the effect a newspaper scandal may have on us—we can't hide behind the anonymity of the Stafford King forever—and I hate the idea of people whispering about someone from the office—"

"You want me to resign?"

"Oh, no, no, no! That'd look even worse. No, but I wish you could bring yourself to tell me the story—you obviously know it. In confidence, of course. Then I'd know what to expect. I could guard—take certain steps— If you'd name the guilty party, even—"

"I don't know him," Clint said. "Nobody does. Mary never said."

"But it was someone on the farm. It must have been!"

"She seemed to admit so tacitly."

"Um—and I guess you could give a fair guess who. You'd better, you know. You're not going to be in a happy position."

"D'you think I don't know that? All week I've been dreading the moment this broke."

"Then, if I were you—"

"Oh, no, you wouldn't, Ed! Not on suspicion. Not even if you were



reasonably sure. It's Mary's secret—and his—not ours; and you know it. The manager in you is only looking for a scapegoat."

Ed sputtered more stuffily than ever.

Ed Thomas's accusation was not the first, nor the last; but few were as direct or as easily denied. Though it had irritated Clint at the moment, he had found he minded directness less than the sly questions and hints which were harder to answer, and minded even these less than the speculation of which he was conscious behind his back.

Soon it was common knowledge that he not only had been at the hospital when Mary died, but had been sent for. Whether the truth had leaked out, or it was only a shrewd guess, there was no way of knowing; but it was having its effect. The farm was whispering, and Clint sensed being watched, stared at. Groups broke up or moved off as he approached, and people ducked to avoid him. He tried to believe it was imagination, but it was not.

The ugly irony was that Mary had not actually wanted him. She had wanted someone, anyone, from the farm—anyone outside her own family. Ben would have done, or Ed, or Wharton Pettit, none of whom would have been hurt by it; but because for some reason Clint's name had been in her mind—propinquity, perhaps, or frustration—she had asked for him, and the damage had been done.

He knew that a few who were his friends were stanchly repeating his denials; but denials were too dull to keep pace with this story. Nothing so exciting had hit the farm in years, for it could scarcely have been improved upon short of having Ed himself in Clint's role. It had sex, melodrama, someone from the office as villain; and, to top it all, the irony of puritanical Ida Heim getting caught in such a mess.

It would, Clint thought, take a place like Weyland Meadows to see this crude, elemental humor in anything so gruesome; but the farm saw it and snickered. This, and the morbid curiosity of those who tried to pry into the anatomical details of Mary's illness, disgusted him most.

And yet beneath the excitement, the superficiality, the morbidity, there was something else. For once, Clint thought, the dairy was honestly shocked. It had pretended to be often enough, for it was proper to be shocked when a girl got in trouble. But there was an accepted way of dealing with such situations: you got a metaphorical gun and went after the man and a preacher. Not one person there—except Ida—would have done anything else; but she had handled it in another way, one so far from what any of them could conceive that this time they were funda-

mentally shaken. People asked why she had gone to such extremes, and found no answer—nothing but a sobering intangible so disquieting that most felt the need to shrug it off and stop wondering.

Characteristic of their attitude was their lack of sympathy for the Heims, or sorrow for Mary. This was, perhaps, natural—the Heims had never been greatly loved; but to Clint, who now knew their story, it was cause for mild regret; they deserved both, he felt, for as he saw it, a tragedy had been played out last week end at the hospital.

And “tragedy,” in his opinion, was not too strong a word.

For Clint that Saturday was terrible enough; yet it was only the climax of an ordeal that seemed endless, though it stretched back in time barely two weeks to the day Ida had given him his walking papers. He had sensed something wrong even then, and the period of waiting before he found out had been one of foreboding and strain. On top of it had come the week end at the hospital, nightmarish and exhausting, and the period when he had waited in numb dread for the news to break, well knowing what would be said about him.

Now that it was being said, his temper was frayed, his nerves raw. By evening he was angry, disgusted, restless, unable to settle down; and about nine o'clock he got his hat and sought the friendly darkness, intending to walk awhile, perhaps end up at Goetzes' for a talk. He had barely reached the road, however, when he noticed the red glow of a cigarette among the pines that sheltered the orchard; and an instant later a voice he recognized all too well called his name.

He thought, So here it comes—and what am I going to say?

Mickey Pratt said: “I gotta talk to you, Clint. I know you don't want me to, but listen, huh? Somebody's got to! I have t' talk.” The tone was urgent, edged with hysteria, but carefully low-pitched.

“All right. Come on. Let's walk.”

Mickey tossed his cigarette away, but then, as they turned into the County Road, lit another nervously. He was silent until Clint finally prompted him:

“What did you want, Mickey?”

“Aw, hell, I don't have to tell you. You know! It was me got her in trouble. It was my fault. Only—I don' know what to do. I— You—Y' understand, don't you? What should I do, Clint?”

“Do you have to do anything?”

“Well, everyone's blaming you—and you didn't do it. I did—and I feel like hell about it. I mean—not just you, but about it all. I do' know

how it happened." Words spilled out now like water over a sluice. "I never meant to touch her—honest! It was the mood. I was low. I'd come to see you about something, see? About Charlie's burning the barns and trying to get me and all. And I wanted to talk to you, but you weren't there. It was the night of the big storm, and you were at Goetzes'; but Mary was there. Alone. In a nightgown. And I—"

"I don't want to hear the ugly details, Mickey."

"She invited me in—"

"I have no doubt! But I don't want to hear."

The other was silent awhile. "I'd 've married her," he said then, "if they'd just asked me. I sort of wanted to." His voice rose. "What did they have to do that other for? I wouldn't 'a' made trouble. Honest!"

"I know. They didn't ask you because Mary didn't name you. That probably means she didn't want to marry you."

"Then why'd she keep after me like she did? Why—"

"Mickey, I don't pretend to know. Perhaps she wanted an adventure, perhaps she had an urge that had to be satisfied somehow, perhaps she was merely defying her mother. I don't know. But she didn't want you involved. Remember that."

"But to do what she did instead—Jesus! I don't get it. And then to die from it. Why, it makes me feel— What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing."

"But I can't go on as though— Just working here and saying nothing! It wouldn't be right. I did something—something— I ought to be punished. How can I go on, knowing I've— I have to do something to make things right. I have to!"

Clint sighed. "What is it you want to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe go to Ed, tell him about it, and—and quit. Get out. If she'd lived, I'd 've married her. But, with her d-dead, what else can I do? I ought to go on trial with the rest, but—"

"No such luck, fella. Yours is a private hell."

"I can take the blame, stop what they're saying about you."

"Will that help Mary? or her parents? And I've already faced the worst. No, you'd be helping no one but yourself."

"Myself!"

"Of course. Why do you want to confess, except to get things off your chest? get rid of the burden of guilt?"

"You trying to tell me I shouldn't?"

"Not necessarily. You'll do what you must, Mick. Everybody does—run, dodge, or fight. Only your confessing won't help the rest of us—"

don't deceive yourself that way—and you've much to lose. Don't forget you've been picked for schooling, for a job that may bring you more importance, responsibility, and money than you've ever dreamed of—"

"I don't want to be important! I don't want to go to school. I don't want responsibility. All I want is to stay here—it's home to me. But—after this— Aw, hell, Clint, I don't want to confess just for myself. I want to do what's right! Help me out."

Clint shook his head. "I don't know what's right. Who could? And no one can help you. You'll do what you have to do."

## VI

"Is that you, Ben? Well, for goodness' sake, where have you been? I've had supper waiting half an hour. Monday or no Monday, this is too long for you to work—"

"I'm sorry, hon. We—the boys had a meeting."

The clatter of dishes ceased. "The boys? . . . *You* went to a meeting of the boys?" Sonia Goetz came swiftly to the living room. Ben, sitting on the sofa, looked white and utterly drained, and it confirmed her sudden fear. "Ben! It's not—"

"Yeah," he said. "But keep it under your hat till after tomorrow. They're seeing Ed then—in the afternoon."

"No, Ben! Ben, they can't! Not without Sam Roberts—"

"He's with us. We're giving Ed our list tomorrow, and he has a week to think it over. Then, if we don't get what we want, we're walking out June 4th—a week from Wednesday."

"The idiots!" Sonia fumbled for a chair. "Oh, the idiots, Ben! Don't they see they *can't* strike? The milk business is a public service, like water or gas or power—a seven-day-a-week service. There are babies. There are diets. There are hospitals. They have to have milk. They depend on it. And the boys can't afford to do it, either. Can't they see that it's cutting their own throats? that they won't have jobs to come back to? Customers 'll get their milk elsewhere, and a lot won't bother with us again."

"We don't think it'll come to striking," Ben said. "Ed's got even more to lose than we have. He'll come to terms. He'll have to."

She clasped her hands tightly to hide their trembling. "Ben, you know

he'll never yield to this kind of force. He'll find some way out. There are strikebreakers—"

"Nah. Not even experienced milkmen could deliver strange routes on short notice, even if we let 'em try."

"Stop talking as if you were one of them! I can't stand it."

He sighed. "I am, hon. They didn't give me much choice."

"What do you mean? . . . What did they do? . . . Threaten?"

"Just told me. Myhychyk and Roane got me aside and said it was no good being stubborn; that, if it came to a strike, they wouldn't let me take my truck out anyway—and I might get hurt trying."

"Oh, nonsense! Those are strong-arm tactics. They wouldn't dare."

"They dared."

Ben had obviously been convinced beyond doubting. To Sonia, it was incredible; yet it seeped slowly home that this had been inevitable from the first. When men decide to act, the timid and reluctant are forced into line.

Still it revolted her to see Ben knuckling under, and she cried with sudden anger: "Then take the beating, Ben. For God's sake, stand up for what you believe! I'd rather see you come home on a stretcher than submit spinelessly to bullying!"

"Yeah, I know."

"We'll go to Ed. Now. Tonight. We'll tell him that, even though the boys are forcing you in with them, you'll be on his side in a pinch."

He was shaking his head, and she cried out suddenly in panic urgency:

"But, Ben, you must! Be honest with yourself: you don't believe as they do. Stand up and say so. Ed'll understand. If he knows he can count on you—"

"It's not so simple. I don't believe in striking nor in their forcing me to join up. . . . But, with a strike decided on, we'll all have to choose sides—and I'm not on Ed's, Sonia."

"Ben, don't be crazy. Of course you are! Even granting there's justice in the drivers' complaints, their methods—"

"Hon, you're not worrying about methods or justice or the drivers or Ed. You simply know, if business is hurt and some of us are let out, I'll be one of them; so you want me to suck up to the boss. Well, I won't. At heart, I'm with the boys, even if I dislike their striking. I faced their threats once for you last winter—"

"Yes, Ben—and remember what happened? Lew Barchi backed down. So don't you see what threats are worth? Must you be bluffed again?"

"That other time, they weren't ready. They are now. But what I meant was, some things—like facing them—can be done once, but not again. You can see that, can't you? So please, hon, don't make it an issue like before. I can't face up to it. I—I couldn't take a licking from them, even for you."

"But it has to be an issue! I can't let you do this."

"Can't you see it isn't in me? It isn't there—even if I did it once. You mustn't say to me, 'Do it—or else!' Not again. God knows I love you. If you left me— Well, there's little enough to me now—"

Sonia was furious. "Stop it! Stop it! I hate you when you talk like that."

She ran from him. Ben, eyes on the floor, heard her feet clatter on the stairs and along the upper hall, heard a door slam and bedsprings creak.

He sighed wearily, sadly. She would be weeping.

But at least she had not made him choose.

After Barchi and Chief Myhychyk had collected their hats and left the building, Wharton Pettitt went into the inner office, where Ed sat stabbing the blotter viciously with his pencil point, gazing sightlessly through the window.

"Trouble?" the bookkeeper asked.

"Um? . . . Oh, hello! Didn't know you were still around."

"I had a hunch. It looked like another delegation, and those two make a sinister combination. . . . Trouble?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Ed grimaced. "They had an ultimatum. The boys want certain things within a week, or they'll strike June 4th."

For once even Pettitt was taken aback.

"Surprise?" Ed asked acidly. "Shock to me, too. I thought, with Sam Roberts and Ben out of sympathy, the boys were stymied."

"What happened?"

"I don't know." The manager shook his head. "I was so sure of Sam! Ever since Dunty left, I've felt safe. I still can't—" He shrugged. "Oh, well! They caught me off guard, that's all."

"Hope you didn't say anything you shouldn't have."

"I said nothing. They were in no arguing mood, and I wasn't going to plead with them—"

"I should hope not! What did they want?"

"Plenty. For a starter they want their commissions upped: 13 per cent on retail collections, 7 on wholesale. Overtime above fifty hours a week. They want a salesman and a twelve-months' guarantee on cut routes—none to be cut without a driver's permission more than once in five years,

and then by not more than a quarter. They want to pass on hiring and firing, no man to be fired except for dishonesty—”

“Ha! Tell ’em to go to hell.”

“I’d like to.”

“Like to! Now what do you mean by that?”

“I mean, if I do we’re in trouble.”

“I told you how to handle this last summer,” the bookkeeper said. “It still holds. Fire Barchi, and the organization ’ll fall apart.”

“Barchi’s not the answer any longer. Tom North, Bill Bevis, and Sam Roberts are. Besides, if anyone’s fired before the dead line, they’re walking out on the spot.”

“Bluff. If I were you, I’d meet each man tonight as he comes to work, take him aside where he’ll get no moral support, and put it up to him: work or quit. They’ve families to support. They’ll work. You’ll have the strike licked in two hours.”

Ed sighed. “Or have it on my neck before I’m ready. Oh, Jake, Ben, the Chief might cave. But how—tonight—could we deliver seven routes with three—or at most—four men?”

“How—a week from now—can you deliver seven routes with none?”

“At least I’ll have had time to think, to find a compromise.”

“My God!” Petitt said in disgust. “You won’t talk terms with them—under threat of force! It’d mean you were licked. One hint of weakness, and they’ll squeeze you to the last drop.”

“No. I may have to talk terms, but there’s a limit.”

“Limit—once you’ve yielded ground? Nonsense! In two days you’ll have every department on the place on your neck.”

“There’s that to consider.”

“I tell you action—fast, hard action—is all they’ll understand. Smash back and you lick them. But show you’re scared, and the farm—”

“Scared!” Ed said, nettled at last. “Scared! Why, it’s mere common sense not to throw a match in a powder keg.”

The bookkeeper said with patient anger: “Can you conceive of those men actually walking out? Look what they have to lose!”

• “Look what we have to lose. Seven routes! They’d make a difference to our profit. We’ve the *more* to lose, worse luck, and I’m afraid they know it.”

“Then what’ll you do?” Contempt was strong in the question.

Ed shrugged. “Frankly, I don’t know. That’s why I want time to think. I don’t know at all.”

Word of the strike washed over the dairy in great widening ripples, the shock of it taking everyone's breath, for there had been no ground-work and no build-up. The action people had hoped for and dreaded was upon them with the suddenness of lightning.

And its effect, after the first stunned amazement, was like that of victory. Spirits lifted at its promise and its defiance, hearts surged, old resentments burst into flame, and the beaten leapt to arms. In the first flush of enthusiasm, few had any doubt of the strike's outcome, and few were sorry that the time had come.

Though the drivers were oddly tight-lipped, and the office made no statements, the list of demands was fairly accurately known. So were the bare facts of Sam's adherence and Ben's. That was enough. The drivers were acting as a unit and were obviously sure of themselves, so what chance had the management? Ed was on a spot.

There was so little doubt of it that before Wednesday night there was a tendency to rush the bandwagon. There was quick incipient trouble in Amos Vliet's creamery, where Larry had long been spreading dissatisfaction; and up at the barns the boys listened to Donny Ochs in half-persuaded excitement. Unrest swept the dairy, and the case of Mary Heim, tasty as it was, was almost forgotten; the strike was far closer to the hopes, fears, and passions of them all. In the garage Happy Jacobs and Vic Stewart had a deadly serious hour-long talk with a partially convinced Red Walsh. Some of the farm's women contributed their share also, recalling old grievances and bringing real and effective pressure to bear on their menfolk.

Only one department head took swift, decisive action. Swan Ellis called together the three men who composed his year-round staff. He said thinly: "There's a lot of strike talk, boys—and there'll be more. Haven't heard yet that you've joined in, but I want to say this: if any other department wangles itself better wages or what-have-you, the farm department 'll get its fair share. That's a guarantee. So is this: so help me, if one of you bastards so much as thinks the word 'strike'—much less says it—you'll be out of here so damned quick you can't spit."

After a brief silence, Marc Vaccarelli stopped chawing and said, "Hell, Swan, us bastards know you'll take care of us. We ain't kickin'."

"O.K. And if you hear any strike talk among the seasonal labor, let me know, 'n' I'll handle it. That's all, boys."

Swan knew his men, and they knew him. His was the one department, in the days that followed, which kept its sympathies and opinions to itself, and its significant silence gradually had a chilling effect on the



rest. In spite of this, restlessness continued to grow, slowly assuming serious proportions. Talk became more open and more daring. From the first the farm's optimistic sympathy had been with the drivers; but now its support was more active, more impressive. By Thursday night other departments were edging perceptibly toward joint action.

It was whispered that the office was desperately worried.

Meeting Sonia Goetz that evening, Clint Matlock shook a wry head. "It's come," he said, "with a vengeance. Or I'm afraid it has. Right now it's hanging in the balance. If people only knew their strength, if they'd the gumption to act as well as talk, it wouldn't hang long. They could tie Ed in a knot. He's saying nothing and wearing a poker face I didn't know he owned; but, if he isn't scared pink, he's a fool. It's my guess he's reaped the whirlwind."

"Is it honestly that bad? I can't believe it."

Clint shrugged. "The drivers alone were strong enough to win a compromise. If the farm strikes too, they'll mash him."

"Oh, I hope not. I'm so torn, Clint, so worried. I've hardly slept since Ben told me. It's—I don't agree with you. I don't believe the drivers can win. Somehow—knowing Ed—Of course hope guides our thinking. Everybody else wants to see him beaten, so they think he will be. But he can't be! He mustn't be. You believe that too, don't you?"

"I don't want to see him badly licked, no. But I believe he may be. Notice, by the way, how already it's come down to a question of who's going to win—not who ought to. Pity too, but inevitable."

"I'd like to see the drivers crushed!" the woman said fiercely. "I'd like to see those responsible for this thrown out—or I would if Ben weren't among them. That's why I'm so torn."

"That's not the answer, either. Neither side should win—at least not decisively. It'd only mean the rankling of defeat, the overbearingness of success, new resentments, new hates. If only there could be a compromise so fair it'd result in a new attitude on both sides—"

Sonia cried, "Of course, Clint! My feelings run away with me so. Reason, logic, sense—they must prevail, mustn't they?"

He shrugged. "Things have gone so far—It's too much to hope."

"There must be something somebody could do—"

His hands lifted in a hopeless gesture. "The farm's not going to give anyone the chance. They're ganging up to settle this once for all." He added bitterly. "Or so they think!"

On Friday, Amos Vliet stopped at the boarding house and caught Donny Ochs in the dormitory washing up for lunch. "Hi, Don. Just got you the afternoon off."

"Huh?" The boy was surprised and not quite pleased.

"Thought you'd like to go for a drive, it's such a nice day."

"Hey now, wait a minute. What goes on?"

"Got something to show you. Meet me at the garage at two."

"The hell with it! I'm not going anywhere blind."

Amos grinned, turned, and jogged downstairs.

Outside, he crossed the drive and strode toward the creamery gang who were sprawled on the lawn enjoying lunch. He said: "Hiya, gang. Hiya, Larry. How's the strike coming?"

The boys stopped eating and grew oddly quiet. Larry Ochs's soft red mouth hung slack. Their eyes avoided his.

"I hear you're set to walk out when the drivers do. That right?"

Frenchy Boudreau growled: "Why not? What we got to lose?"

"You might ask yourselves who got you into this—"

Larry drawled shrilly, "Now look here—"

"I don't mean you. You're only Lew Barchi's stooge. There's something about Lew Barchi you Ochses go for, isn't there? Only Steve knew when to back out." Amos said to the boys: "If you guys think Larry's got a quarter of the brains or savvy Steve had, you deserve the licking you'll get." His voice deepened, roughened. "Why d'ya think the drivers need your help if they got everything nicely in the bag?"

"Hey!" Larry said. "You're crazy. The drivers got nothing to do with this. It's our own idea. The boys got some rights, ain't they?"

"That's Lew's line you're spouting now."

"Well, hell, it's so. We're a key outfit. And what are we paid?"

"Not much, and you do a good job," Amos said. "But last year you were paid less—and worked longer. What do you want—the moon in one piece? You got a raise in January, you got a new building, new tools to shorten your hours. You got another raise coming—provided you don't make the boss sore. What more do you want?"

He let the silence hang briefly. "Frenchy wants to know what you got to lose? Well, I'll tell you. That next raise, your reputation as the best damned department on the farm, and one other thing: your jobs. Because I can pick bums off the street that'll do any job in this plant as well as you—and save the farm 25 per cent too. And by God I will if I hear any more of this strike bull from any of you!" He looked directly at Larry.

No answer. They looked guilty and scared.

"O.K. But, while you're at it, think this over. For once Larry's right. You are key men. That means you could tie this farm up tighter than a sailor's knot, and without any assists from Barchi, his drivers, or the barn either. You don't need 'em. So if you got reason to strike (a real one, 'cause it's goina react on other departments and a lot of guys you don't even know—dealers, a whole raft of customers), and if you are honest-to-God sore about it, to hell with everyone else! Get together and do it for your own benefit, with your own guts and in your own time—and be damned sure you do it when you got me over a barrel! . . . Think it over."

Donny showed up at two o'clock as Amos had known he would. He said: "I come to say I'm not going. Larry's been to see me. I know what you want—and to hell with it!"

"If Larry's been to see you," Amos said, "you know you'd be a damn fool not to come along and see what I hold. Climb in. And look this over while we ride." He fished an envelope from his pocket and held it out.

There was a conflict of wills which Amos easily won.

As they rode down the County Road, Donny opened the envelope and the folded paper inside. Watching out of the corner of his eye, Amos saw his frown of puzzlement and then the slow flushing and hardening of his face that meant understanding.

"What the hell is this? A list of producers?"

"Yup. Yesterday's deliveries. From the barn, thirty-eight cans of milk. From the producers, a hundred-and-eighty-odd—"

"So what?"

"The barn," Amos said, "is small fry in our scheme of things."

"The hell it is! Thirty-fourty cans is still a lot of milk. We might not close the plant, but we could make plenty trouble. Our thirty cans are all A."

"That," Amos said, "is the reason for this ride."

They followed the producers' route south, and after an hour's driving turned into a dirt road, drove up over a wooded ridge and emerged between broad level fields green with young grain, across which were visible the white house and gray barns of a substantial dairy farm. Turning into the drive, Amos said, "Keep your mouth shut, sit tight, and listen."

The pick-up passed the house, slid into a pin-neat barnyard, and

turned around while a nice-looking, youngish man emerged from one of the barns and came toward them with a look of eagerness.

"'Lo, Vliet. How goes it? Bringing me good news already?"

"No news, Blake, good or bad. I was down this way again and thought I'd stop." He grinned. "Sort of a relief to see a real solid place for a change. I see so many lousy ones."

To Donny the name Blake was unfamiliar; but he knew Amos was paying no idle compliment. Blake could be an A producer and a good one.

Amos was saying: "You won't reconsider—send us part of your milk? After all, any you sold as A would be cash in your pocket."

"Eastern Dairies are—difficult," the farmer said, his face suddenly tired. "They'll only pay me B price, but if I sent part of the milk somewhere else, they wouldn't be above cutting me off. And without a market for the rest—" He shrugged. "No profit in that."

"But if we could take all eighteen cans, you'd come to us?"

"Overnight! Hell, I'm tired of trying to keep this place up to A standard on B prices. It can't be done."

There was silence in the car as it slid down the drive, but before it reached the highway Amos spoke: "That's the big one. There are two more, eight cans each, both up to Blake's quality. Now it's shorter going home the way we came; but if you don't believe me, I'll take you to see them. What d'ya say?"

"Go to hell, damn you!"

Amos smiled. "I found Blake yesterday in two and a half hours. The others I've known about for some time. Well, I can find three more easily enough—or six or a dozen if I have to. On short order."

"O.K.," Donny said. "So we can't tie up the farm. We've still nuisance value. You can't leave cows un milked and unfed—"

"Not if you're a decent human being," Amos said mildly. "But luckily there's guys in every flophouse to do that kind of work. What you think you are? Skilled labor? Think it over!"

Donny thought it over—in silence—most of the way home.

Amos's interference had immediate effects at both barn and creamery, where strike talk abruptly quieted. Other departments, finding themselves suddenly alone and exposed, drew in their necks with undignified haste, asking caustic questions which went unanswered, and for the moment at least the possibilities of joint action lessened. Watching critically,

Amos decided it had been a good afternoon's work. It was too early to say that the tide had turned, but pressure on the office had at least been noticeably relieved; and in the present state of things, Amos thought, that would be enough to make Ed decently grateful.

## VII

At long last, unable to sleep, Clint Matlock threw aside the sheet, put his legs out of bed, and reached for his dressing gown. Belting it tightly, for the night was cool, he moved to the window and stood listening to the din of the peepers and considering gloomily the deceptive quiet of the farm.

Silence and immobility. Dark buildings save for the low bright windows of the barns and a few lights at the boarding house. The street lamps reaching yellow fingers across the grass, throwing black shadows from every new-leafed tree and bush. Starlight over everything, soft and gentle.

The casual observer could have found peace and beauty in the scene, perhaps the symbolism of rest after the day's toil; but Clint was not so naïve. Here, at best, was calm before storm; at worst, the quiet, ugly tension of inevitable tragedy.

In the next few days, many would have to choose, and he with them. It should have been easy. He was personally unconcerned; he was new enough to have an unbiased view, yet well enough acquainted to be familiar with many an angle including some few others knew; and barely a year before he had chosen this dairy as offering him the best possible future. He remembered the Chamber of Commerce and its enthusiasm for the small but growing place, for Wycoff, for Thomas who had "vision and perhaps a genius for expansion." Yes, it might be they were not too far wrong. The dairy had gone on expanding. Its sales were well up; so were its profits. With the new creamery it was set for still further expansion at home and in the metropolitan area "where its future lay." So, considering the recent brush with Eastern Dairies, the Chamber might well be more enthusiastic about the place today than ever before. To outsiders, Weyland Meadows must still look a winner.

Outsiders.

Clint was reminded of Wharton Pettit and his statement that the dairy

had grown so fast it had corporate indigestion. When Pettitt had warned him against internal currents he had been unbelieving. Now he wondered if there had not been more—and more serious ones—than even the bookkeeper had guessed, currents now emerging into a flood that threatened to carry all resistance before it.

How had it happened? Who was responsible?

He saw the blame lying with both sides and perhaps with every individual. The weak had let themselves be pushed; the strong had thought with their ductless glands. Accident had played its unpredictable part. So had twists of emotion and character. Still there was an ultimate answer and an ultimate responsibility. So it seemed to Clint.

Or were his feelings running away with his judgment?

Painfully aware that Mary Heim's death had plunged him into an emotional caldron of which he was still feeling the effects and being one to lean over backward to be fair and reasonable, he feared he was giving disproportionate importance to the farm's role in that tragedy.

Perhaps in spite of his convictions, the farm had had no role in it at all. Many would have said so. Many would have blamed Mickey Pratt or Ida or Mary herself. Was he right in seeing deeper, subtler causes? Was he right in reading so much into something Ida had said that dawn at the dead girl's bedside?

His thoughts traveled back.

\* \* \*

He remembered the first queer hollowness when Ed had brought him Mary's message. He had been startled, yet not fundamentally surprised; for, in a sense, the summons was half expected.

On the heels of shock had come apprehension, the confirmation of unacknowledged fears added to some subtle preknowledge of what his going to the girl must eventually look like to the farm.

He had gone to the hospital stolidly, numbly, as one goes to face the unpleasant inevitable.

He remembered the long shallow alcove where he waited. It was separated from a bleak hall by a series of arches, and had a dark red rug and leather-upholstered chairs. Venetian blinds made it dusky, but small-bulbed, darkly shaded table lamps managed color, warmth, and even cheeriness, except that the perpetual hospital hush, the inevitable hospital odor, crept into the place, making its dimness mysterious and portentous.

It was here that he faced Ida. They met alone, and he was shocked by

her appearance. He saw a haggard, haunted woman, dry-eyed and feverish, noticeably thinner, noticeably grayer, but a woman in whom defiance burned hotly, whose continuous slight trembling came not from weakness or defeat, but from something that, even today, he could scarcely put a name to. She had entered slowly, her bitter eyes searching his.

He said he was sorry about Mary. "I came as soon as I could."

"She kept asking for you." The flat unfriendly harshness of her voice startled him. "The doctors insisted you be sent for."

"How is she?" he asked uncomfortably, unable to guess why Mary should have wanted him. Not understanding, he was afraid.

"Very ill," the woman said thinly.

He had been surprised. Somehow, hospital or no, it had not occurred to him that she was really sick. "But what's wrong, Mrs. Heim?"

She had told him, but it had meant nothing. Blood poisoning? A neighbor boy had had it once from a sliver in his finger. It was a development of infection.

But, if that were all, why the secrecy, the silence? Why had he been asked to leave the Heims'? It made no sense.

Yet it may have, all the same, for his next question was edged with tension. "But why does she want me?"

Ida, cold and inimical, said, "I wish I knew!"

"Better take me to her, then. We'll find out."

"She's not conscious. You'll have to wait."

Feeling futility and fear, Clint said, "Of course."

He remembered how, after Ida had gone, he had picked up a magazine, only to sit with eyes unfocused and mind blank. He made no effort to answer the questions or solve the problems arising out of his presence there, Ida's attitude, or Mary's sickness. He could not. Time stood still while he waited in blank, dumb dread, and there was no room in him for thought or action. Perhaps, deep down, he had already guessed; that might have been why he shunned thought.

It was a long, ghastly wait.

About midevening he became aware of not having eaten since noon. He was half afraid to go, less ill luck make that the moment they sent for him; but in the end his stomach persuaded him, and he left word at the desk and went in search of a sandwich and soda. He hurried back, but had not been wanted.

Food helped, and his vigil was more bearable.

Once another man struck up a desultory conversation; but it was a strain, and he feared afterward he had been rude. And once a grief-stricken party was brought in, a hysterical woman, a man who kept trying to comfort her not too tactfully, and another man who swore monotonously in a strangled voice. They paid no attention to him, but he left them in possession shortly and waited in the foyer.

Much later an intern came looking for him.

"Matlock? . . . Come along. You're wanted."

It was then half-past one on Sunday morning.

He remembered their traversing a corridor, a flight of stairs, and another corridor. The intern led the way swiftly, and the building was so quiet Clint felt impelled to walk tiptoe. Pausing at last before the closed door of a private room, the man said: "This may amount to nothing. She may not know you."

Ida was not there, nor was Adrian; but a nurse sat inconspicuously beyond the low-shaded light, and the intern, closing the door behind them, leaned against the wall with folded arms, observing quizzically and critically.

Obedying the brief flick of a finger, Clint moved reluctantly to the high bed where Mary lay, flushed and restive. Her eyes were closed, but her lips, oddly prominent against wasted cheeks, moved continuously, emitting small, painful sounds which he recognized at last as his own name, "Clint—Clint," repeated over and over. It came to him unreasoningly that he was looking at a dying girl; but then he reminded himself that he was no doctor, no judge of such things.

"I want Clint," the girl said, more distinctly.

"I'm here, Mary. What do you want?"

She did not hear. One hand struggled up to push at her hair, and he touched it, repeating: "Here I am, Mary. It's Clint."

Hot, dry, fierce fingers closed on his convulsively, and her eyes strained eagerly, desperately while she tried to moisten dry lips with a tongue that was dry too. "Clint: I knew you'd come! I knew you would. I knew you would."

She repeated it till he interrupted. "What did you want, Mary?"

"I made the doctor send. I made—where is he?—I made him send for you. Mother didn't want to, but I made him—I had to see someone from the farm, so I made him. Didn't I? Where is he?" She spoke urgently, feverishly, trying to raise herself to see.

The intern said: "I'm here. Better say quickly what you want to say."



"Yes, yes. Of course. Of course. What did I want to say? It's gone. I can't think. Clint—something—"

"About the baby?" the intern prompted.

Clint stiffened. A baby! he thought. And Mary's been asking for me. Naturally they think—this doctor thinks— Oh, hell!

Looking back, he was ashamed of that swift defensive thought.

"Yes," Mary said weakly. "The baby. The baby. I was having a baby, Clint. I wanted him so much, but—but—" She wandered off.

Conscious of the intern's eye, Clint repeated, "Why did you want me, Mary?"

"So you could tell them. The farm. Tell them I wanted my baby, that I was going to have him. I didn't want—this! It's mama's fault. She planned it. It wasn't me. I want people to know that."

"Now you mustn't get excited—"

"But you have to understand! Mama didn't think I could have a baby if I wasn't married; but I didn't care. I wanted him. And I wasn't going to marry— No, I can't say who. I mustn't! Mama says she wouldn't let me marry anyone from the farm, but that's a trick. If I said who, she'd get a minister, and I won't! I won't, I won't, I won't—"

"Sh! Of course not. No one can force you to—"

"But I wanted my baby. You understand, don't you? I *wanted* him. I wouldn't have d-done this to myself. You know that, don't you? Mother won't tell them, and I want people to know—"

"You'll soon be telling them yourself—"

She shook her head. "I can't, even if I get well. I can't go back. They wouldn't let me. I wouldn't want to. But people who knew me— Tell them I wasn't a girl who'd kill her own baby. I'm not that bad. Maybe I wasn't good, but I wasn't that bad! They mustn't think that of me."

"I understand," Clint said. "Of course."

She repeated the message over and over until delirium returned. Then Clint released her fingers, and the intern came silently across to take her pulse. Their eyes met, and the intern's were more friendly.

"Sorry," he said, "if I thought nasty thoughts. She hasn't named the father of her child, so naturally when she kept calling for you we wondered. I'm pleased to apologize."

"Forget it," Clint said. "It was only natural."

He felt vastly relieved, which was natural too, but beyond that was the beginning of another emotion—a powerful, bitter one that would grow till its pressure was intolerable, an anger such as he had never known.

He said, "She's a sick girl, isn't she?"

"Yes, but Caron's put up a devil of a fight for her. No one could do better—not in this town. Even if he doesn't make it. He feels so strongly about her mother that it's almost personal. He'd give his soul to pull the kid through."

"I can believe it. If I have it straight, it's an ugly mess."

The intern drew him away from the bed and spoke in a low voice. "It's all of that. Suspecting the pregnancy, her mother took her to a fellow called Quincy—self-styled 'doctor'—to be 'examined.' So she said. But she'd seen the man earlier and arranged for him to go ahead if her suspicions were correct." He grimaced. "Sonofabitch went in with a sound, broke the sac and the uterine wall too. Made a hell of a job of it. Poor kid didn't know what it was all about; but she'd been hurt, and she got scared. Her mother insisted nothing unusual had happened, even when the discharge came, but the girl told her father finally. First he knew of it."

Clint said, "I begin to see why Eunice and I were sent away—"

"The sister? Yes. The mother cleared the house before she started; didn't want anyone around who might suspect. With any luck she'd have got away with it—but you can't have luck without antisepsis. The infection took its time developing, and if they'd called Caron a day earlier—" He shrugged. "But the woman was trying to cover up, of course."

The intern paused. Then: "I've said more than I should have, Matlock, but when a patient gives a stranger a garbled account of her history, I like to set him straight—especially if it's to be repeated—"

"It won't be repeated," Clint said. "She chose the wrong person to spread her news. I'm not even going home. There'll be too many questions. Ah—will I be needed again? Could I stay and help in any way? I'd like to."

The other shrugged. "The girl may ask for you again, and if you're handy it might keep her from fretting."

Clint nodded. "Of course I'll be handy. If that's all I can do."

He remembered the next forty-eight hours in shifting patterns. His mind played tricks, leaving great blank patches hours long, shot through with vivid intervals and impressions. Would he ever forget the convalescents' sun porch with its wicker furniture and cretonne coverings where he lived, slept, waited—waited endlessly? or the corner drugstore

with its soda counter where he ate, or that persistent hospital odor he could never quite get used to? or the silence, which was only the more unpleasant when it was broken?

Impressions of doctors, nurses, orderlies coming, going, passing, re-passing; of dim, bare corridors in which swift, starchy rustles marked people's passage instead of footsteps; of flowers, of visitors, of Mat Caron—white, grim, hard-voiced—confirming him in his decision not to repeat outside what he had learned here.

And, through the nightmare, cold static moments when he stood at Mary's bedside with her hot hand clutching his, her parched lips repeating her message over and over whenever she recognized him. Memories of Mary flushed with fever, tossing in delirium, inert in coma; memories that came clear and cold through the weariness and hot emotion that fogged those hours.

He had tried not to think, not to wonder about the questions that had been left unanswered by events. There were quite a few, though they had not leapt to the eye; queer questions, more of character than of fact; questions which had no answers; questions of *why*.

He was thankful to be thrown so little with the Heims, for sight of Ida inspired genuine physical revulsion. It seemed incredible that he had lived a year beneath her roof and never suspected the things of which she was capable. Loathing of her and contempt were a part of his slowly growing, bitter anger, an anger continually fed by her look of unregretting defiance.

For Adrian he had only pity. Adrian was beaten. His thinness had become emaciation, his wiriness was gone. Once Clint was left alone with him for ten minutes of sheer horror. They had spoken in platitudes, while Clint weighed every word desperately lest it carry unintended reproach, pain, or offense. Thereafter he avoided both Heims, and they him.

And through it all, Mary—slowly dying. Clint hardly knew why he stayed; he was no real help to her, even though, for brief seconds, his touch could lift her back to consciousness. She talked to him often, but never once named the father of her child, though her references to her mother were frequent and bitter. Clint came to hope violently that she never would. She cried constantly for the baby. "I don't care about talk," she kept saying; "I want him. I'm going to have him. Whether I'm married or not." And repeatedly: "I won't tell. I won't. I won't. I won't."

The hours dragged. Sunday. Monday. She was sinking slowly. It was a hopeless, terrible vigil. Clint knew he was no longer of use, but could not leave. Perhaps he dreaded returning to the farm before the finality

of death; perhaps he was too involved emotionally to leave short of a climax.

He remembered Mat Caron's coming for him early Tuesday morning. "It's the end," Mat had said quietly. "We've done all we can."

He had led Clint to the sickroom, where Ida and Adrian already were, just as though he were one of the family; at the moment it had seemed right. They had found Mary moaning and restless, fighting her fever weakly. She kept muttering urgently but incomprehensibly, the sounds coming from her throat through heavy, stertorous breathing.

Clint's helpless anger swelled and blossomed in those dawn hours while Mary struggled and died. No doubt Caron had thought the end only minutes off; but it had been far longer: so long that gradually, as time dragged out, Clint believed he could stand it no longer. He was unable to watch the painful scene on the bed, unwilling to look at the Heims, so he had sat the whole time, fifteen minutes, half an hour, eventually an hour, with his eyes on a corner of the floor where there was nothing to see, listening to the sounds that were the only sounds to be heard.

For once in his life he abandoned himself to unbridled emotion.

About three A.M. there was a change. The breathing quieted, and Mary's eyes opened, great and staring but normal. At first they roved wonderingly, not identifying the room, but then they located the watchers and halted. Recognition came, and the girl shuddered. Her lips flattened, drew back.

"Mary!" Ida went to her quickly. "You're better."

The girl looked at her mother, and Ida slowly straightened and took a step backward. The silence built up in that small room till it seemed to scream. Then Mary turned her face away.

Ida stood stiff and very white.

The girl's eyes closed again. She said nothing. It was still an hour before death came, peacefully at last.

Clint remembered how Ida had watched the nurse lower the dead girl's arm: stony, dry-eyed, numb. There had been long seconds of silence before she sighed and turned away.

Then, as her look met Adrian's and he avoided it, something exploded. She cried harshly: "I want you to know I loved her. No matter how it turned out, I loved her. There isn't anything I wouldn't have done for her, and I couldn't let her make the mistake we did."

Adrian said nothing.

Clint rose quietly and escaped. He had had enough.

In the week that followed, that final cry of Ida's had assumed a perspective and significance it had not had at the moment of utterance. Clint had been too exhausted then to understand or care; but, once he had begun reliving those scenes, the words had come back to him. What mistake, he had begun to wonder.

And then, thinking back, he had decided he could guess.

A guess, of course, was only a guess. Still it fitted. It was right. It accounted for so much, filled so many gaps that he was sure of it from the first.

Much of the picture, she had given him herself: the portrait of her mother, dissatisfied as the wife of a humble doctor, disappointed in a social career which she had wanted, sublimating her failures in planning a finer, more glamorous career for her daughter, making that dream so vivid to the girl's young mind that it had survived the reality of Adrian and of Weyland Meadows Dairy, and was still in wistful, incongruous existence when Clint had talked to her.

And she had sketched for him the portrait of old Doc Symmes, warm-hearted, but a financial, social failure, a kindly old man financing his daughter's plans—which he could not have believed in—at considerable personal sacrifice, furnishing clothes, beauty parlors, dancing schools, even part of a college education.

And Adrian, upsetting all plans by persuading her to elope.

Persuading her?

No, Clint thought, it had been more serious than that. She herself had made a point of how soon after their marriage Mary had come.

Like mother, like daughter. No wonder the woman had tried to shield her children; she had known the pitfalls of adolescence from bitter experience. Clint thought wryly how he had considered Mary the image of what Ida must have been at the same age. Now he knew that the resemblance went deeper than appearance.

It was not hard to believe that that lapse might loom in Ida's sight as her most horrible mistake—and not merely from the standpoint of morality. It had meant the end of the life she had dreamed. It had meant twenty years of Adrian, who was not the husband her mother's dream had pictured. It had meant fifteen years of Weyland Meadows which she had come to hate.

So she had watched her daughters with abnormal care, and, in spite of it, had seen the pattern begin to repeat itself. Mary had got herself in trouble, and she too had submitted to a social inferior—to “someone from the farm.”

Ida must have decided then to break that pattern forever.

Telling the girl she would not be allowed to marry her seducer was no trick; it was the simple, literal truth. She would not permit her daughter to make the mistake she and Adrian had made, the mistake of marrying. Rather than condemn Mary to the kind of life she herself had led, Ida had taken to drastic, unorthodox steps.

This was the *why* of her action.

With understanding, Clint's loathing and contempt for her faded. His feeling became less condemnation than pity, for it was a tragedy which had been played out, and Ida, anyway, would have her public punishment.

Still, the hot anger which had been born in him at Mary's bedside was far from dead, and being deprived of one outlet had sought another, finding its focus in the farm itself.

To Clint, Weyland Meadows' role in Ida's actions was not obscure. It might be said she was a small, petty woman who would have been unhappy anywhere, that the dairy, no matter how lavish with its employees, could never have been the “society” that she yearned for. Still, to him, it sufficed that she had hated the place, and that it had done not a solitary thing to make that hate less, or increase her contentment with her lot. She had hated it so completely that her daughter was dead.

But Clint's feeling went deeper still. Mary's death had brought into focus something of which he had long been half conscious: the effect of the farm, as an entity, on those connected with it. He was thinking of it in two senses—as the management with its policy, and as the people who lived here, who had been shaped by that policy and were in their turn shaping others—and in both senses, in the past year, its weight had touched the lives of many, and most of them malignly.

There was Ben Goetz. There was Tom North. There was Isaac Ledmuller. There was Freda Ellis. There was, he suspected from what Mickey had said, Charlie Dann. There was many another who was mired here without hope of getting away.

People were what they were by inheritance and environment. Granted that these had had little to start with, still, if Weyland Meadows had brought out the worst in them, it had something to answer for. It had

been in Clint's heart for a week now—hot and heavy as molten lead—that it had a lot to answer for.

The time of answering might be near.

\* \* \*

It was this hot, vindictive anger which he feared was affecting his judgment. In his heart, he would have liked to see Ed licked, and he was inclined to think he might yet see it; in spite of Amos's intervention, it looked as though the drivers could give him his lesson. Yet, in spite of his anger, Clint hated to see this happen, for he was sure that if either side won decisively it meant goodbye to all hope of permanent peace.

And already it might be too late. Still, Amos had restored some balance to the situation, and it was just possible that a compromise was now possible. If somebody worked for it.

Clint stared bleakly into the darkness of the night, wondering why it should be he, who had developed an active hate of Ed and his policies, who must be that somebody.

The barn and the boarding house were now dark. The farm slept.

"What compromise is possible?" he muttered to the night.

First, you had to get rid of the threat of force; persuade the drivers to discard the strike, the farm to promise no reprisals. . . .

He thought about it for a long time.

After a while he crossed the room, turned on the light, blinking in its brightness, and got a pencil and notebook from his suitcoat pocket. Then he sat down in the armchair and went to work.

## VIII

WAITING for his book to be checked, Lew Barchi had cocked his feet on a desk, complacency large on his face.

"You look as if you owned the office already," Clint said.

The driver waved that aside blandly.

"Lucky, though, that you're a good milkman—and Ed's tolerant. If he got tough—"

"Plenty times I could 've been fired," Barchi said, "without anyone's

saying, 'Bool! Yeah, an' there may have been a day when you could stop trouble by knocking me off, but not now. Oh, no! Six of the eight of us mean business right down the line."

Clint leapt on that. "So two of you don't?"

The driver grinned. "That's right. Ben and Jake. I wouldn't be kidding you any if I said they did. They can't take it. So what?"

"You may need 'em—if it comes to trouble."

"It won't. It may not be till the morning of the 4th when Ed sees his milk standing on the dock—but we'll win."

"He's stubborn, Lew. He might choose suicide rather than yield to pressure. Suppose he doesn't give in. Do you still walk out at the risk of having no jobs to come back to?"

"There are other jobs. We're still young."

"I hope the boys agree."

"Six of 'em 'll strike. Probably all eight."

Barchi was quietly confident, and Clint was impressed.

When he finished checking the route book he shoved it across.

"Lew, why risk it? You could afford to compromise."

"Goddam right. Whaddaya think we're going to do? We asked for more'n we wanted, so we could. We're no dopes."

"Ed's willing to compromise too, I imagine, provided the threat of force is removed. After all, no one likes to be pushed around—"

Barchi's look narrowed. "What you gettin' at? You speaking for him?"

"No, no, no. I've no standing. But, if the boys are willing to discuss things without threats, I think he would."

A shrug. "If he's coming to terms it's because he's scared—"

"Then you've gained your objective. Why press it unreasonably?"

"Fella—listen! If I weren't sure of the boys, if I thought they wouldn't stand the gaff, I'd take you up on that. But I am! They mean business. And I'll say nothing to make 'em ease up."

"Why not?"

"Uh?"

"Why do you hate the farm? What's it done to you?"

"To me? Nothing but what it's done to all the rest. I don't hate it. I don't want to smash it up. Why should I? I only want to teach it a lesson, and the one way I got is to threaten. And you'd like me to throw away my weapon and lean on Ed's loving kindness. Nuts! We tried that already and fell flat on our puss—so it ain't goina be us who start backing up this time." Barchi scowled. "Hell, no, I don't hate it—or Ed. I just see



things that are wrong and yell about 'em. I do' know what it is. Something inside of me." He made a pushing gesture with his hands. "Any guy can go out and deliver milk. But can you fill a life with that? It don't count. It don't give you anything to feel good about. And what else have I got? Me, a cripple? I can watch other guys do things, but hell! you want to do something yourself." He frowned. "Down inside, I figure I'm doing good, see? Helping people. I'm doing something for the world." He grinned. "Barchi the boy scout, get it? One good deed a day."

"Which includes smashing up a business that's the livelihood of seventy or eighty people?"

"We're talking about different things. You figure Ed'll hold out."

"He's ready to go as far as you are. As I see it, you'll both walk to the edge of the cliff together—and then walk right on over rather than be the first to stop. That's crazy, because neither of you wants to—or wants the other to. You've threatened as a means to an end; but, if you're fools, threats could become an end in themselves—a very definite end!"

"Yes," Barchi agreed blandly.

This was on Saturday afternoon, and Clint, alone in the office, had had a chance to talk to several of the drivers with results increasingly discouraging.

Chief Myhychyk, airily impervious to doubt, had the absolute confidence of one who lacks intelligence to be afraid. It seemed to him that the boys could not lose; that compromise, even, was unnecessary. And if the farm were permanently injured, it deserved all it got: it had cut his route, hadn't it? To the Chief it was as simple as that. Clint could not guess his reaction if these fearless assumptions proved suddenly false, but clearly he was not going to change his tune until it was far too late to talk terms.

Larsen, on the other hand, was scared, but sported the artificial courage of a man lost in a mob. Because Tom North and Sam Roberts were backing the strike, he believed in the justice of it; he also believed, with childlike trust, that they would let nothing serious happen to him. Against such faith, Clint's arguments had no force.

Hal Roane professed to be indifferent. "If we win, O.K. If we don't, I'll get a job in an airplane plant. Always wanted to. More future. Be a good thing."

"For a man who doesn't care," Clint said, "you've done plenty to promote this. Weren't you the first to join Barchi after—"

"Join him? Hell, I picked him up when he'd fallen flat! But I was sore at the farm then. Sore as hell. For personal reasons."

"And even if you're not now, you're still with the boys?"

"Sure. Where else 'd I be. They're going to win."

"Are they? You've a family to think about, Hal. A pretty nice one. You've plenty to lose. Why risk it?"

"Right now," Hal said, "there's more risk stopping than going on. When two cars smash, the one traveling fastest gets off best."

"If both slow down, people come out alive."

Hal shook his head. "This has been coming a hell of a while; now it's too late to stop. If Ed Thomas had the guts to keep his foot on the gas, it'd be a smash to shake the farm; but he hasn't. He'll lose his nerve. We'll roll over him and never feel it."

Late in the day, Red Walsh came up, looking for Ed.

"He's not around," Clint said. "Why? More trouble?"

"Nah-h. Wanted to tell him not to worry about the garage no more. For a while the boys kinda felt their oats; but they're quieting down, like the rest. That letter sort of got to 'em."

"Letter? What letter?"

Red perked up at finding someone who had not heard. "Well, hell, there's this story going around. Don' know if it's so—Larry and Donny both swear not—but everybody's talking. Seems Steve wrote 'em to stay clear of the trouble here; that all Ed has to do to cinch a swell job with Eastern is to show he can handle labor. I don' know—maybe there's nothing to it; but they got fac's an' all. They say it's the managership of Eastern's whole New England division at twelve thousand per; and they figure, for a job like that, Ed'll shoot the drivers if he can't win no other way. It's kind of scared 'em off."

For an instant, Clint said nothing. The story, so reminiscent of last summer, smelt faintly, and he wondered momentarily how, if Donny and Larry were not spreading it, it had got started. Then he shrugged.

"Good. It makes the issue far clearer."

He heard enough during the rest of that afternoon to realize that the tide, which Amos had checked the day before, had been definitely turned, suspect though this new rumor seemed to him to be. A native caution was replacing the farm's first enthusiasm. People were recalling that the drivers as well as the farm had much to lose, that Ed Thomas was stubborn. His ominous silence, his apparent lack of nervousness or uncer-

tainty were being talked about, and men who had been within an ace of teaming up with the drivers were sweating in the memory of their narrow escape.

Though still faintly puzzled, Clint was grateful. Not only was the issue now uncomplicated, but it seemed to him that this additional pressure might incline the drivers perceptibly toward compromise. When he got home, he thought, he would talk with Tom.

Tom North was not alone, however. Both Bevis and Sam Roberts were with him at the house, and it looked like a council of war.

"So," Clint said, "you've heard about Steve's letter."

But Bevis only grunted. "Aw, this place! Up one minute, down the next. Suppose it's so. What can Ed do? Eastern won't want him if he smashes us by ruining his business. Seems to me it only makes the cheese more binding."

The others too were unimpressed. "We don't want or need help from anyone," Tom said. "They been saying we asked other departments to come in with us, but we never did."

Clint was nonplused, wondering what, then, was behind their meeting. "It sounds," he said, "as though you were perfectly confident of the outcome and happy in your approaching victory. But you don't look it."

There was a silence that made him a little uncomfortable, and he began to suspect that he had hit closer to the truth than he knew.

"Well, hell," Bevis said, "I guess we all wish Ed had been big enough to see our side without our having to get tough. But, damn it, he wasn't. So what could we do?"

Tom North said: "Don't ride us, Clint. Quit it. I'd toss the whole thing over on half an excuse. We're right. We're doing it the only way we can; but I've led the boys into a spot where they could be badly hurt—and I got the jitters."

Clint looked at Sam Roberts, who said quietly: "Don't say it. Considering the length of time I've been here, I admit I didn't stand by my principles very long. But, like all tortures, it seemed endless while it lasted."

Clint knew then why they had gathered. Committed to striking and sure of the outcome though they were, not one of them was easy in his conscience; and misery loves company. To Roberts he said deliberately, "How does Ben's being forced in with you square with your convictions?"

The man said, sweating: "It doesn't. But Ben, like myself, believes in

the boys' side, and Ben, like myself, found circumstances making him choose. We're not happy, Matlock—but we're going through with it."

"I wouldn't try arguing you out of it. I would like you to see compromise as the way out of your dilemma."

"Ed might as well learn his lesson—"

But Bevis said: "Oh, hell, we'll compromise. There's points on that list I won't back and the boys know it. They'll talk terms."

"So will Ed—if you boys are willing to forgo your threats. Drop the strike—which you hate anyway—and there's a damned good chance you'll get most of what you want. I'd nearly guarantee it."

They looked at him in grave silence, and for a moment he thought the wild gamble might win; but then Bevis said, as the rest had:

"We already tried that."

Tom nodded gloomily. "Of course if he wanted to make a definite counter offer—and if it was in range—"

"Do you mean that? Do the others?"

"I don't know. It'd have to be definite—and a promise. I don't trust Ed much any more."

"The hell with it!" Bevis said. "Let's keep our club."

"No, let's be reasonable about it. If he wants to do something like that, let's meet him halfway. Sam—"

Roberts, flushed a brick-red, was starting to shake his head when Clint interrupted. Having found his break in the drivers' ranks, he was not going to lose it if plea or argument could prevent.

And because all three men were fundamentally moderate, he was not without success.

Nursing his glimmer of hope like a lone match in a high wind, Clint Matlock went to the manager on Sunday morning.

"I've butted into something that's none of my business," he said. "I've been sounding out the drivers to see if there was any hope of compromise short of the battlefield. I think there is. Are you interested, or have you decided how to handle things already?"

Ed Thomas drew down his lips with a hint of a shrug. "They have me over a barrel. I'd be glad to listen."

The frankness struck Clint as off key, as Eastern's purported offer had. He said: "If the threat of force were removed, would you sit down with the boys and talk turkey? Give them part of what they want?"

"Um—possibly."

"I have to have more than that. I have to have a flat yes—and a specific idea of what and how much you'd give."

Thomas frowned. "You're acting for the boys."

"No, but I've an idea what they want. If you'd make an offer—"

"Not while they're threatening. If I compromise, it'll have to be in a way that won't bring the whole farm on my neck."

"Better to make one than have it forced out of you."

The manager flushed, but asked, "What have you got in mind?"

"I typed this out last night," Clint said, taking a paper from his pocket. "You might look it over. It's an open letter to the Weyland Meadows Drivers' Association."

"That's virtual recognition of the organization. We can't have that."

Clint put both hands on the desk, angry words on his tongue, but then thought better of them. "It's a little hard not to recognize them," he growled, "when their fist is practically in your face; but, if you agreed to the principles of the letter, its phrasing could be changed."

Ed took the sheet and skimmed it through, muttering occasional points aloud. "'Upward revision of wages through overtime payments.' 'Salesman in the fall.' 'Discussion of the route-cutting problem.' Um. I suppose we'll have to give them a little something along those lines. 'Threat of a strike to be removed.' 'Sit down at the conference table.' 'Time for concession has come, even at some cost.' Um. 'Without prejudice or reprisal.' You want to give them about everything, don't you?"

"I don't think so. It represents my idea of the fairest solution that could be reached and still leave a little room for bargaining."

Ed tossed the letter onto the desk. "Leave it around. I'll think about it, but it's pretty specific. It may be fair; but, in return for a mere promise not to strike, it's too much. The rest of the farm would jump on me."

"They'll jump if the drivers force these—or greater—concessions too. It's a moral victory if you make them abandon the strike."

"True, of course."

Ed sounded neither genuinely worried, nor greatly interested in the proposal; and Clint knew he had failed. It followed that Ed had another solution and was merely pretending to consider suggestions.

A solution, Clint felt uneasily, not based on compromise.

On Monday afternoon Barchi roared into the main office, a paper clutched in one fist. He was headed for the manager's room, but the open door and empty chair brought him up short. He whirled on Pettit.

"Where is he? Where's that—"

"Out."

The driver held the crumpled paper forward and slapped it with his fingers. "Well, what's the idea? What's this mean?"

The bookkeeper took it gingerly, perusing its four lines of typing as though he had never seen it before. "Seems perfectly clear," he said. "Ed wants to meet the boys in his office, Tuesday afternoon June 3rd, at three o'clock, to—"

Barchi's fist hit the desk. "I can read, goddam it. I know what it says—but what does it mean? 'To discuss the problems facing us?' What problems? Does he mean this strike?"

"I wouldn't know"—acidly. "He doesn't confide in me any more."

"Well, if it is—the hell with it! He's got to talk to the committee. The boys elected me and the Chief to speak for them and he's got to deal with us. He can't go over our heads—"

"All right, he can't. What am I supposed to do?"

"The hell with you! I'm sitting here till he gets back and—"

"He's gone for the evening," Petitt said coldly. "To New York."

Barchi stared, said viciously: "Of all the goddam lousy tricks! Why? Just so we can't talk to him before—"

"No," Petitt said. "To see some man called Purdy at Eastern Dairies."

## IX

ED THOMAS said: "Donny, this is Pete Zyboski who's taking Mickey's place. Take him up to your boss, then show him the ropes."

"Hey!" Donny said. "I noticed Mickey'd been gone since Saturday. What the hell happened to him?"

"He left—as of the end of the month."

"I'll be damned! Why? He get another job?"

"I'd give something to know," Ed said thinly. "Considering what we spent sending him to school, and considering he knew he was to be put in charge of the Ledmuller farm, it was a damned ungrateful stunt. I'd like to boot the excuseless so-and-so into next week! That's how I feel about it."

"Jesus!" Donny said.

## X

ED had confided to no one the purpose of his notice to the drivers, and he had forestalled questions by the simple expedient of not being at the farm. He stayed away Monday night and all Tuesday morning.

For him to call a meeting before the ultimatum expired was only natural; and he had chosen the last possible moment. Still, the drivers' first reaction was nervy. His absence, the curtness of the notice, the mystery of his intentions, worried them, and they wanted to answer with action of some sort. They would have liked to defy the summons, feeling that to obey it was to take the first step toward defeat. They talked about bluffing an immediate strike, but it was hard to bluff a man who was not there; and they nearly decided to send the committee alone, defiantly, to the meeting next day. Then, as their first uneasiness faded, calmer heads pointed out that the notice was actually a sign of weakness—Ed wanted to talk to them all, knowing the committee was too tough; and in the end no action was taken. Indeed, both talk and apprehensive anger died away rather quickly, and it was a thoughtful rather than a frightened group that drifted home that evening. A sense of the importance of the morrow, of their role in it, of the stakes involved, weighed upon them, and they knew with unexpected clarity that victory was uncertain and would depend on their brains and courage. Perhaps each in his heart, that night, faced issues more squarely than ever before.

It was a mood that the farm as a whole reflected. People were less gloomy than they had been over the week end, yet not optimistic. Among them also, after news of Ed's move had been digested, talk died; not from discouragement or defeat, but merely because the time for talk had passed. A feeling of crisis prevailed, an ominous calm before the storm that rose from the knowledge that decisions soon to be taken must in some degree affect everyone. Even those who had never been more than excited spectators, felt sobered; for the gravity of the moment was now apparent to the most superficial. Some were frightened, but fear was not the general tone. It was too late for that, too late to boast, too late to guess. There was nothing now but to wait, and Weyland Meadows, tensely, quietly, was waiting.

Tuesday, the drivers arrived early, checked in, in record time, and hurried off to change their clothes. Perhaps it was a subtle sense of what

was fitting, or an awareness of the psychological difference clothes might make; but it had been quietly conceded that coveralls would not do.

Dressed in their best, they began dribbling back as early as two-fifteen, a serious, subdued lot. The first arrivals reported that Ed Thomas was in his office, having arrived about two-thirty with a little fat man whom no one knew. It was a quiet gathering. Lew Barchi arrived bringing a wave of forced cheerfulness; but Bevis said, "Oh, for Chris' sake, shut up!" and was so heartily seconded that Lew, looking startled, actually did so. After that, there was enduring silence. Hal Roane pretended to work on his route book. Sam Roberts fiddled with a pencil. Ben Goetz and Tom North just sat. Chief Myhychyk leaned against a wall so that he could look through the window and watch the clock.

It was he who announced finally, "Three o'clock, chief."

There was a suggestion of a sigh.

"O.K., let's go!" Barchi said. And as Jake Larsen showed signs of lagging: "Come on, ya bastard, get the lead out. What you scared of?"

"Scared? Who—me?" Jake followed reluctantly.

Clint looked up as they came in, and so did Pettitt; but neither spoke until Barchi started for the closed door of the inner office. Then the bookkeeper stopped him:

"Wait. Ed has someone with him. Purdy, of Eastern Dairies."

Their reaction was as tangible as a rise in temperature though there was scarcely a movement or a change of expression. Those odd stories of the week end had been not without effect.

"It won't be long."

Barchi and Tom took the chairs; the rest perched on window sills, radiators, the spare desk. The room, unpleasantly crowded, was soon stuffy.

The men waited expectantly, not settling down but holding themselves ready to rise on the instant—and the instant did not come. No one spoke. There was an indistinct murmur from beyond the partition. Clint's adding machine clattered. Pettitt's calculator whirled. From outside, an occasional scrap of talk drifted up, the noise of feet on the gravel, the sound of a car. On the wall the second hand of the big electric clock moved silently, steadily.

Five minutes. Ten minutes.

Barchi cleared his throat disconcertingly. "Hey—what goes on? That notice said three. What's the idea?"

"He'll be through soon."

"How 'bout tellin' him we're waiting?"



"He knows you are."

Silence again. Somebody coming for an advance gaped at the rigid gathering and whispered his request as he might have at a funeral. The second hand loafed around the clock's face.

Fifteen minutes.

"Blast it!" Barchi said. "We're being stood up. He's doing it on purpose. He figures our nerve'll crack."

"The hell with him!" Myhychyk said.

"All he's doing in there is tell Purdy how good he is, softening us up this way. Y' know it? Y' know what he's doing?"

Tom North said: "You might be right. It could be intentional."

There was a growl of agreement.

Clint suspected Ed had overplayed the card. After ten minutes they had been nervous. After twenty they were getting their courage and their anger back.

The growling grew. Barchi urged them not to wait—to walk out and stay out; but, just as Clint thought they might, a chair scraped behind the partition, there was a sound of movement, and the door opened. A purring butter ball of a man emerged, and behind him swaggered the manager.

Ed Thomas looked insultingly confident. He had his head in the air and spoke arrogantly: "Go in, boys. Make yourselves at home."

They had risen, looking hangdog by contrast. They felt it too, for they shuffled awkwardly while Ed stepped to Clint's desk and added: "Mr. Purdy and I aren't through; but he's willing to wait until I get this other over—it won't take long. In the meantime, will you type this out?" He had two sheets covered with pencil writing. "Three copies, please. If there's anything you can't make out, ask Mr. Purdy. He'll know."

He turned and saw the men still hesitating. One or two were scowling at the Eastern Dairies man. "Go in, boys. Go in. Can't give you the whole afternoon, you know. Whart, will you come too, please? I need another representative of the management."

In the face of his confidence, Clint felt suddenly that the drivers' chances were pretty small. Ed wanted them to feel exactly that, of course. Still, if it was an act, it was good.

Ed shooed Jake Larsen toward the door, and it started a clumsy general movement. Several, Clint noticed, turned on the threshold to glance accusingly at Purdy, who beamed at them. Pettitt followed them in. Ed followed the bookkeeper like a sheepdog herding his charges. The door closed.

Clint crossed to the typewriter with Ed's papers. I. R. Purdy, he saw, was now beaming at him.

The inner office was small, and the chairs which filled it now took up so much space that sifting through them was a problem. The boys jammed together at either side of the door, leaving an alley for the manager and Pettitt. The bookkeeper took an inconspicuous seat in a corner, while Ed Thomas sat back of the desk after opening the case-ments there.

"Sit down, boys, sit down. Let's get at this. Ben, d'you want to open the other windows? Smoke, if you like."

They milled forward. There was a marked impulse to avoid the front row; but, as the confusion subsided, those who had neglected to sit quickly had to accept unwilling prominence.

Then, as the noise quieted, Barchi said, with only a little of yesterday's belligerence: "I want to protest. If this meeting is about the strike, you oughta meet with the Chief and me. We were elected for that. You got no right going over our heads."

"I don't consider it that." Ed spoke with a peculiar bland mildness. "We are to discuss the strike, but the decisions facing us are so grave that you and Myhychyk would scarcely care to take them on your own initiative. With all of you here, we can get it settled. I'm merely saving time."

There was a slight, uneasy movement. Barchi sat down slowly, frowning, and the men looked at one another, seeking courage.

"First, I'll ask you to withdraw your threats. If you do, I'll consent to discuss certain phases of your—ah—'demands,' I believe was the word. Much as I dislike 'demands,' I'll discuss them with you on those terms."

Myhychyk said, "I guess you'll discuss 'em anyway."

"No, I'm afraid I won't. Please understand my position. I'm not blameless for this situation. When you came to me last winter, what you asked seemed impossible, but perhaps I might have stretched a point. I'll go further: I should have. And—to a certain extent—I'm ready to reconsider. But I will *not* do so under threat of force. Is that frank enough? . . . Will you meet me on that ground?"

Tom North asked, "How about a definite offer?"

"No."

It was so flat it stopped their questions. Nevertheless, the boys had perked up slightly, sensing in the unmilitant beginning a concession of weakness. At least Ed would talk.

After a pause Barchi shrugged. "We barked without biting for a hell of a while. Now we got our teeth in your leg, why should we let go before you drop the silver?"

Ed made a face over the implication but asked merely, "Is that how you feel too, Tom? . . . Ben?"

Tom nodded, and Ben said huskily, "I'm with the boys, Ed."

"I see. It's understandable. Still, I'll promise you serious and sympathetic consideration—on those terms."

"Y' mean you'll give us all we want if we'll make the first move?"

"I do not! I'll promise concessions—but not what or how many."

Myhychyk said suddenly: "What the hell, Lew? Let's call it off. What can we lose? If he don't give us enough, we'll just call another."

Ed looked quizzical. Pettit flushed, fuming silently. One of the drivers actually laughed at the baldness of it. And Barchi explained amiably:

"That's not what he means, Chief. He means we gotta agree to the results of the talks in advance—like 'em or not."

"Nuts to that, chief."

"Yeah, an' that goes for me, I guess. How about it, Hal?"

Hal Roane nodded lazily. "As far as I'm concerned, this is *it*. Here and now. To hell with stalling or talking any longer."

There was a mutter of agreement.

"You see how they feel," the cripple said. "This is the showdown."

Ed sighed. "That suits me."

"They've called—so lay down your hand. What are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

They took it stolidly, expecting it, though perhaps the quality of the one word twisted for a moment in their stomachs.

"You're not badly treated, you know. You're not getting all you'd like, but you're getting more than you would if anyone but Jerry Melius owned the business—"

"Oh, for Chris' sake!" Lew Barchi said.

"He hasn't had as much out of it as any one of you."

Barchi snorted. "Why should he? He's got plenty!"

"Luckily—I think you'll agree—for all of us."

"You mean, if he don't like how things are going, he could fire the lot of us. Sure. That's us—living at the mercy of a rich bastard who can ruin us if he don't get the last drop of sweat he thinks he's entitled to! . . . Look, you guys, this ain't gettin' nowhere. What d'ya say? Let's get the hell out!"

"I haven't finished," Ed said. "Sit down, and watch your tongue, Lew."

You're in a precarious position, remember. ~~NO~~, what I meant was this. If Jerry had asked even a fair return on his investment, no one here could have had a raise for years to come. Instead he has turned the profits back to you—"

"Hell of a lot we seen!" the Chief said. "Me, I'm getting less'n I did a year ago, thanks to your damned route cutting!"

"If you'd worked, you could have filled that route."

The Chief fairly leapt. "The hell I could! I worked like a dog—"

Ed waved an impatient hand. Pettitt, frowning, wondered if he were needling them deliberately. "Let me get to the point. You knew, didn't you, that you'd a raise coming this month?"

Tom North said, "A raise we should've got in January."

"And only to twelve and five," Hal added. "That's not enough."

"That's why I was sorry you wouldn't meet my terms. If you had, I'd have given you good news. Thirteen and seven is out of the question, but Jerry had authorized me to offer you the twelve and five retroactive to January. It would have amounted to a good deal."

Barchi jeered. "You expect us to believe that now?"

"Here's Jerry's letter. Look it over for yourself."

The cripple waved it aside impatiently, but Tom North took it.

"What the hell difference does it make?" Barchi cried.

"Might 've made a good deal if you'd come in a decent spirit."

"We don't want twelve and five, retroactive or any way. We want thirteen and seven and plenty else, and it's a showdown. Do we get it?"

"You do *not*!"

Silence. This time they were rocked back on their heels.

Tom indicated the letter. "But this offer's still open?"

"No, Tom. You had your chance at it—and turned it down, sight unseen. Now you'll take my terms, not Jerry's; and all I offer is the status quo. No one will be fired, nor will you lose the raise you've been given. That's all."

Barchi shrielled: "Jesus Christ, listen to him! What the hell does he think he is? He ain't going to give us anything now! What does he think *we*'ll be doing? Does he think he's got us bluffed out, or what? Jeez, I've had enough of this! I'm through. How about you guys? You coming? What are you waitin' for?"

Hal Roane got up slowly. "Yeah. Guess there's no point hanging around."

Barchi leaned over Ed's desk. "You better think it over. Remember, not a quart of milk goes out of here tonight. Not a quart. Unless—"

Ed eyed him steadily.

"You see how it is! He won't listen. What're you guys waiting for? Let's get out! And we won't come back till he faces facts!"

Tom North sighed and slowly rose. Roberts followed.

The others straightened reluctantly, shuffling, dragging it out to give Ed time to speak. It was coming down to the line now, and they still felt that it was only bluff against bluff.

Bevis rose. So did Jake. So did Myhychyk. Ben followed, and there was a sluggish movement toward the door.

Ed said, "Leave your route books in the drivers' room. They're dairy property, you know. Try to take them, and I can have you arrested for grand larceny."

"We'll leave 'em," Barchi said. "What would we want with 'em? We seen enough of 'em. Much good may they do you!"

"Before you boys go, may I say that I wholeheartedly regret our association's ending on such an unpleasant note? Believe me, neither I nor the dairy hold ill will; nor has there been anything personal in this dispute from our angle. Indeed, I'm very sorry to see you go."

It sounded final, but they still thought it bluff, though none of them could summon words to match it.

"Drop in tomorrow afternoon," Ed added. "Whart will have your checks. You were paid for May, weren't you? So you've three days coming. We could hold them till the end of the month, but we won't; we don't want to be nasty or take petty revenge. Moreover, they'll be figured at twelve and five as we promised. Thus I hope the parting will be no more rancorous than necessary. Now may I wish all of you luck in whatever you do? And may I repeat that I'm sorry? I only hope there are no hard feelings. So long, boys. Be good."

They had not believed it could come to this, or that it had come. They told themselves it was still bluff; but they were shaken. They had a feeling that, once they left this room, they would be, not striking, but looking for new jobs; and they had no heart for it.

Barchi snarled suddenly: "Whaddaya think you're trying to do? You don't dare fire us. How'll you move that milk?"

"I'm not firing you. You're leaving of your own free choice."

"We're not going far."

"Off this property. If necessary, the police will see to that."

"How'll you move that milk, goddam it! With strikebreakers? Even if we let you, it'd be a mess. No one could deliver those routes cold—"

"I won't try." Ed paused, measuring them, then drew a deep breath

and let them have it. "You see, you've left me no choice but to retire from the retail end of the business."

It had no reality, no meaning.

Tom North repeated dazedly, "Retire—from the retail . . ."

Ed nodded. "And concentrate on dealers. While we've been building seven routes, we've taken on *twenty-four* dealers. In the past year, two routes and five dealers. Even if we dominated this city eventually, there'd be a limit to the routes we could put into it—but there's no limit to the dealers we can take on. Dealers involve far less investment, far fewer headaches—such as strikes. And it's in dealer territory—the metropolitan area—that our future lies. Besides, it's the kind of business I like. It grows route by route instead of quart by quart. You boys have pushed me into a tough, but not unwise, decision."

"Who d'ya think you're kidding?" Barchi demanded. "You can't just drop seven routes—*bang!*—three thousand quarts. It'd ruin you. It'd—"

"We're not dropping them. We're selling them. To Eastern Dairies."

That was the beginning of the end. Now they saw that it could happen, was happening, and they were a sick-looking lot.

"Eastern has decided it'll be a long tough job making this town pay. Too long and too tough unless they can pick up some big business fast. They tried to buy out Keystone, and Keystone turned 'em down. Then they came to me." Ed shrugged. "Purdy's outside now, and Clint's typing up the contract we'll sign when you boys have gone. Knowing Eastern, you can guess it's for a damned good price. The farm's losing nothing. It's you boys who're losers, I'm afraid. Again—I'm sorry."

Barchi said: "It can't be done. How do they expect to deliver routes they don't know?"

"That's their headache, not mine. But they've the best drivers in the business, men who know this town from last winter. Purdy says that with our books—which'll be his when you leave—they can do it. If they can't, it's their hard luck."

Myhychuk said hopefully, "Maybe they'd hire us to run 'em—"

And Barchi cried: "Damn right! And they got the best pay and conditions in the business. Let's go talk to this Purdy—"

Ed said: "If you know so much, you know they're unorganized and intend to stay so. Meaning, they hire no one who's ever been mixed up in labor troubles."

Barchi began swearing softly, bleakly.

Tom said, "You win, Ed—but that doesn't make you right." He gestured. "Sorry, boys. My fault."

The small office was oddly quiet. The men stood, hands lax, eyes on the floor, the rigid bitter weariness of defeat on their faces. Someone sighed. Someone said, "Holy hell, what're we gonna do now?" Tom turned toward the door, and the others moved slowly to follow.

Ed said, "It doesn't have to happen, you know."

The general movement quieted. Faces were raised to his without hope.

"I don't want to sell those routes. You can believe that, can't you? This is our home town, and I hate to be booted out of it, especially by Eastern Dairies whom we've licked. Besides, there's money in the retail business. Giving it up hurts."

Silence. After a moment the Chief nudged Barchi, and Lew exploded: "I suppose you think you've got us, you—"

But Tom cut in. "On what terms, Ed?"

"I told you: No reprisals."

Tom shrugged. "None of us wants to leave—so we've no choice, I guess. That still doesn't make you right. Come on, gang."

"Wait. You all agree with Tom? . . . In that case, I've something further to say. I hold no hard feelings. I used force today because I had to; but I hate it, and I hate to see you leave resenting it. So I'll try to take the sting out. No one will know from Whart or myself what happened here, so if you yourselves keep quiet—"

"Results talk," Hal said.

"Of course. So—against advice—I'm giving you your raise to twelve and five as of last January. Further, I promise you your salesman in September after the summer lull. And I will meet with your committee to discuss some practical solution of route cutting and other minor problems. Lew Barchi will tell you I'm trying to buy back your good will. I am. I want no hard feelings from today's wrangling, and my offer's a solid expression of that wish."

He paused, then added practically: "After I've talked with Purdy again, I want to see Tom North and Bill Bevis. The two of you can wait in the drivers' room. I guess that's all, boys."

There was a confused murmur which might have been thanks or goodbye; but, as someone opened the door and they filed slowly out, they were a silent, unhappy lot. Ed's concessions had not made them like their licking.

Wharton Pettitt said as the office door closed: "The farm'll think they won, you know. It'll be on your neck in twenty-four hours."

Ed shook his head with a smile. "Lot of talkers in that crowd. The story'll get around. Ask Purdy to step in now, Whart, and have him bring the paper with him if Clint's finished it."

Purdy was waiting with the paper in hand.

Clint said to Pettitt, "The boys didn't look happy, leaving."

"They weren't." The bookkeeper licked his lips gently. "They were well whipped. Ed offered them no compromise, no choice, nothing. Only defeat, complete, absolute, and with no redeeming features. They hadn't even the chance to crawl." He spoke with an awe that was tinged with amazement. "He told them that, if they struck, Eastern would own our routes by evening."

Clint stared at him. "Eastern would own our routes?"

"He said Purdy was just waiting to sign the agreement."

"I'll be God-damned!" Clint said. He looked like a person biting into a particularly bad nut. "Well, Purdy's signing the agreement, all right. It's a bill of sale, too. And he's signing it right now."

It was Pettitt's turn to stare. Then his eyes slowly lighted with a marveling, malicious joy. "You mean Ed put it over without—that it's *we* who're buying—"

Clint nodded grimly.

## XI

CLINT said: "Hello, Goetzes. Don't get up, Ben; I know you're tired. I just came over to say goodbye. I'm leaving."

"Leaving! Clint, what's happened? What—"

"Oh, I'm quitting in protest. Useless, of course. Inane. No one'll even know what I'm protesting against, but—" A shrug. "I spoke to Ed after the meeting—and I'm leaving in the morning. Puts the farm in a hole—first of the month and all—but I don't really care. They'll get Freda Ellis to fill in. Perhaps she's good enough to keep the job—if she wants it."

"But I don't understand," Sonia cried. "This protest— What—"

Clint made a vague sound. "Can't take it, I guess. I didn't like what Ed did today, and the only way I could yell about it was to get out. I



had the satisfaction of knowing he didn't like it. He was surprised, angry, upset. For maybe two seconds he knew I was criticizing him."

"But I don't understand! How could it have turned out better? There was no strike, the boys won a little without losing their jobs—"

"It was the way he did it. Some may think it a pretty cute trick—"

Ben said: "Even some of the drivers. Bevis nearly busted a gut telling us the pay-off. Even Hal Roane grinned a little—"

"Then they've more sense of humor than I. Oh, it was clever, coming out of a strike which was to ruin us with nine routes instead of seven. But his way of doing it proved he'd no understanding of the situation and no desire to correct it."

"He only used bluff against bluff, Clint."

"Did he have to humiliate them—then add insult to injury by tossing them a sop?"

"A sop! Why, he gave them almost what they asked for: raise, salesman, everything. Why, if I'd been Ed—"

"*Why* did he give them so much? Because he believed they deserved it? had justified complaints? Because he wanted to correct injustices? No. It was a peace offering, a bribe. It asked them to forgive and forget—or at least keep quiet—and was designed to put them in the wrong if they didn't. If he intended to give them all that, why didn't he come out and say so? It was near enough to what they wanted, so that they'd have abandoned their threats and talked it out decently. He didn't because, from the start, he meant and *wanted* to smash them, to break their spirit. . . . Well, if the drivers, after discovering the trick he played, take it as a joke, I guess he did!"

"Not all of us think it's funny," Ben said. "But what can we do? If we make more trouble, Ed can sell nine routes as easy as seven. Eastern Dairies 'll always be in the market."

Clint nodded. "Oh, yes! He solved his problem: neither you boys nor the rest of the farm will strike or talk strike for some time. For *quite* some time. But there's the future."

"Considering we've put on two new routes and settled our labor troubles, I'd say the future looked rosy," Sonia said.

"Oh, my, yes! Why, look! Seven routes today; nine tomorrow—and one less competitor. And Keystone's going under; soon we'll have twenty. In the meantime we'll have taken on new dealers—Quinlan's playing around with several. Up go our sales. Ten thousand quarts a day before July. Eleven thousand by fall. By winter, twelve. By spring, fourteen. This year a profit of fifteen thousand, next year twenty-five,

the year after—who knows? We're on our way. . . . And here I am—on the ground floor of a coming concern—quitting! Why? Because, boom though it may, this place is facing disaster. The fight's not over. The boys may be blocked now, but neither side's changed its mind. It's far from over."

Ben said: "That's right. Lew Barchi's already talking about outside help."

Sonia echoed, "Outside help?"

"He means hooking in with one of the big unions."

"Oh, dear! No!"

Clint said: "Oh, they'll be in here. You can bet on it. The drivers won't listen to Lew now, but tomorrow—some tomorrow—they will. Ed today drove a humiliating, painful wedge between management and men that makes that inevitable."

Ben nodded, but Sonia shook her head stubbornly, silently.

"For a while after I came to the farm," Clint said, "I saw Ed as you do: a man torn between the good of the company and sympathy for his men; a man wanting and intending to consider social problems if only he might solve his financial ones first. Perhaps we were right. Perhaps, given time, everything would have worked out. But time won't wait; you can't keep circumstances from pushing you around. They pushed Ed."

"They certainly did," Sonia cried, "and he answered the only way he could. He fought back. Can you blame him for that? After all, he can't have the boys running his business for him."

"Is it his, Sonia? Is it even Jerry's? I've always thought of it as 'ours': mine; Ben's; Barchi's; Amos Vliet's; the farm's. To some of us it's meant more than to others; and some of us have meant more to it. Jerry has invested capital. Ed has invested intelligence. The rest of us have invested time, energy, various physical skills. We make a triumvirate, and no two of us are much good without the third. So, have Jerry and Ed the right to say, 'We're the bosses—the rest of you don't count'? Oh, I know, consulting with the hired hands isn't the way businesses are run. But the hired hands have their stake in this—the business is their living and their families'; management's stake is merely money. Still, custom has it that the boys can have no say. Well, there was a time when our rulers didn't consult their people about governing either; and some still don't. Maybe the right of ownership—like the divine right of kings—is to be wrong. That's why I'm getting out: because I don't believe that 'whatever is, is right,' and because this is the only way I can say so."

Much later, after Clint had gone, Sonia said: "Ben, if they're taking on two more routes, won't they need another relief driver? Why not ask Ed for that job? You could do it. You—"

Ben, pretending to be half asleep, mumbled, "Tom got it a'ready."

"Tom? . . . Oh, Ben, Ed should have offered it to you! You've been here longer, been more faithful to him and to the farm. Oh, sometimes—"

Ben lied deliberately: "He did. I turned it down."

"You didn't, Ben!" She stopped herself with an effort, and her eyes fled to the hands tight-gripped in her lap. She said, presently, "So you'll be an ordinary milkman for as long as you can walk a route and lift a case?"

He nodded. "I guess that's it, hon. Maybe you know it now. You do, don't you? . . . Then quit nagging, huh? It only hurts us both."

Sonia turned her hands over, staring at them as though they were dirty. "All right, Ben. Let's call it settled."





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